The Mancunian candidate *Tali Fraser* / Help! I've got four girlfriends *Dear Mary*

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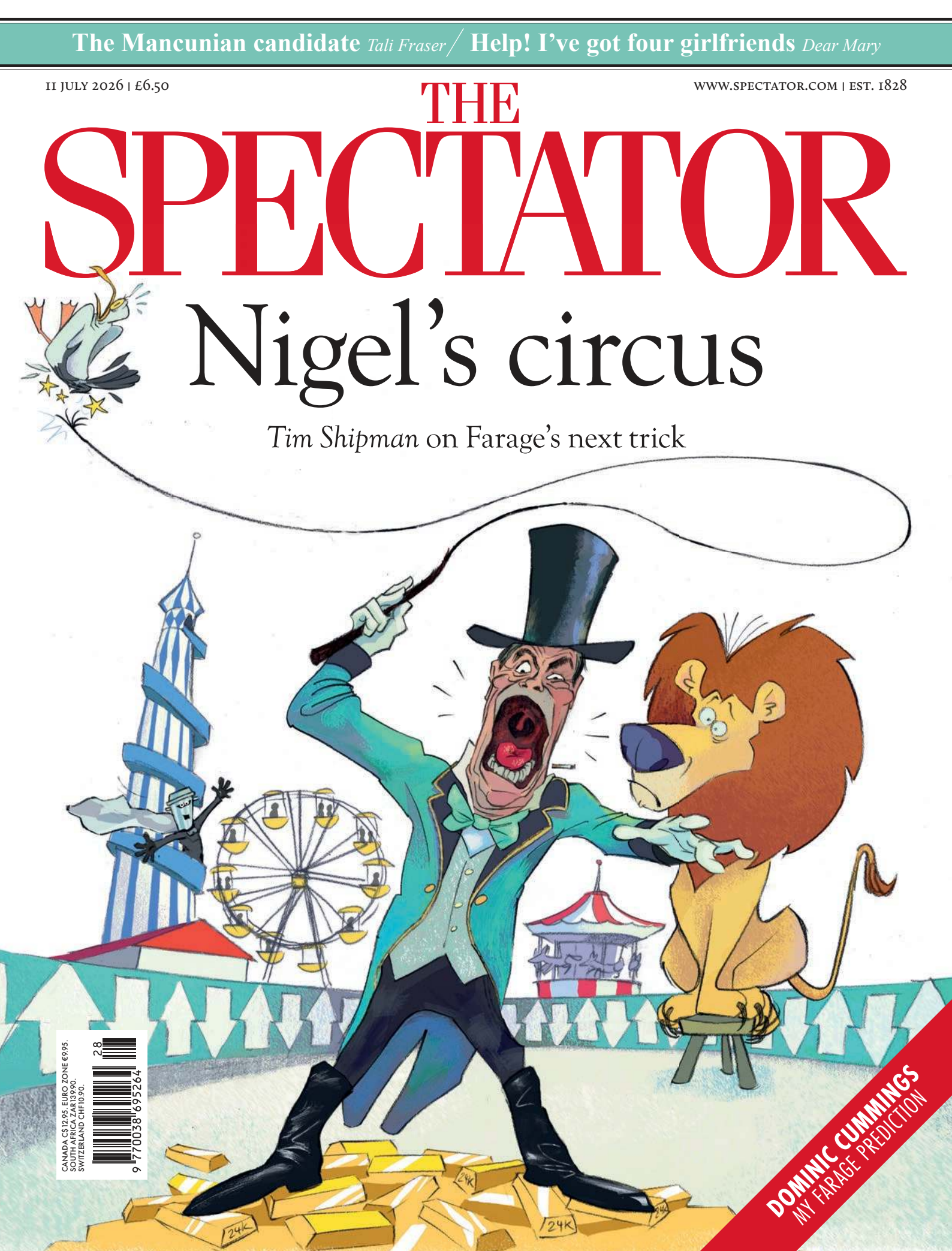
Nigel's circus

Tim Shipman on Farage's next trick



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The Burnham question

Andy Burnham is a lucky politician. And Nigel Farage has just given him another piece of surprising good fortune. The Reform leader's decision to call a by-election so his voters can express their preference for him over a comedian in a dustbin is more than just a narcissistic farce: it is a blessing for Project Burnham. Just as attention should be focused on a man with neither a mandate nor a manifesto for running the nation, Westminster's gaze is directed once more to the dreary beachfronts of Jaywick and Frinton. Burnham's unscrutinised, unelected, unready administration moves closer to power while Reform achieves a feat hitherto thought impossible: becoming even more of a vehicle for the ego of its leader.

The one thing we do know about Burnham is his commitment to greater devolution across the United Kingdom. Cynics question whether the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, let alone Stormont or Sadiq Khan's London, are really models of inclusive growth and human flourishing. But while cynicism is understandable, Burnham's desire to rebalance power and wealth within Britain is not ignoble. If he learns the right lessons from devolution's successes and failures, he may yet achieve some welcome progress.

Since the first world war, Britain has become the most centralised nation in the free world, as the demands of the war and then state socialism meant a centuries-old tradition of robust local government was replaced with the sad presumption that the man in Whitehall knows best. Local authorities only raise around 5 per cent of tax revenue; in France, home of the heavy-handed central state, that figure is three times as high.

The capital's hoarding of power has led to stark regional inequality. High-value and knowledge-intensive sectors are concentrated around London; the decline of manufacturing and mining hurt the north, Midlands, Wales and Scotland as the tide of the Industrial Revolution receded. Britain is more economically divided than eastern and western Germany and northern and southern Italy. From life expectancy to public investment, the capital is the outlier, flattering and skewing national statistics.

Successive governments have attempted to rebalance the economy. Burnham himself benefited from the Metro Mayors established by George Osborne's 'Northern Powerhouse' and Boris Johnson's expansion of local transport powers.

In 2022, the Johnson government published a 'levelling up' white paper diagnosing the interconnected nature of the problems holding regions back and outlining steps to stimulate private-sector growth across the country. The white paper set out 12 missions designed to reverse geographical inequalities by 2030, spreading opportunity beyond London, with long-term targets across living standards, R&D investment, transport and more. Investment commitments were combined with offering every part of England 'London-style' powers.

If Burnham learns the right lessons from devolution, he may yet achieve some welcome progress

That agenda has not yet been fully implemented; it sits, 'oven-ready', on the departmental shelf. But when Labour took office it broke from levelling up, performatively stripping the phrase from the housing department and scrapping the targets.

Labour promised a 'devolution revolution' and wide-ranging ambitions on investment. Yet a rigorous recent paper from King's College London's Strand Group has exposed how Keir Starmer comprehensively squandered the 'best opportunity for tackling regional inequality in a generation' with a lack of leadership, funding or imagination. Burnham at least promises a break from Starmerite stagnation. Yet as Tali Fraser and Gus Carter report on pages 18 and 19, his success in Manchester has been driven not by the 'business-friendly socialism' he eulogises, but by the 'neoliberalism' he abhors.

From embracing Chinese and Gulf investment to waiving affordable housing targets to build as much and as swiftly as possible, Manchester's success is rooted in the Thatcherism that Burnham defines himself against. Besotted with his yellow buses, he has misdiagnosed the secrets of his city's success and overplayed his own role. He is now threatening to do the exact opposite of what prosperity requires, combining a nebulous commitment to 'good growth in every postcode' with further empowering Whitehall by nationalising utilities and creating bureaucracy by prioritising 'social value' in procurement.

Burnham should learn from the most effective examples of local leadership: Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham and Ben Houchen's Teesside. In both the Victorian Midlands and the contemporary north-east, the state acts as a handmaiden to commerce, providing necessary infrastructure then getting out of the way. Both Chamberlain Square's splendour and the industriousness of Teesworks, the UK's largest freeport, are testaments to this. Not business-friendly socialism, just business-friendly.

If Burnham produces a genuinely radical devolution plan with sustainable funding and private sector backing, Kemi Badenoch and Nigel Farage should promise to support it. But if he continues to misunderstand the success of the city he professes to love and keeps denigrating the market system that underpins its prosperity, his proposals will be no more useful than Starmer's. The wait then begins to see if the next prime minister can do better.

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Oliver Shah, who writes this week's Diary on p7, is a former *Sunday Times* business editor and founder of Newcome Advisory.

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Nick Spencer, who writes about J.D. Vance's faith on p34, is senior fellow at the thinktank Theos and author of *Playing God*.

Matthew Wilson writes this week's arts lead on p40 about the creative works depicting Homer's *Odyssey*. His latest book is *Art Unpacked*.

PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK

THEY'VE GOT THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY. WE'VE GOT THE UNDERGROUND

Home

Nigel Farage, the leader of Reform, announced that he would leave parliament (by applying to be Steward and Bailiff of the Manor of Northstead) and then fight a by-election at Clacton. 'It's a chance to stick two fingers up to the entire Establishment,' he said. His announcement came after a report in the *Sunday Times* saying that he did not declare, on becoming an MP, benefits received in the preceding year from George Cottrell, 32, who spent eight months in jail in America after admitting a charge of wire fraud in 2016. The main parties and Restore said they would not put up candidates against Farage. In a 400-page judgment, the High Court dismissed claims of misuse of private information made against the publisher of the *Daily Mail* by the Duke of Sussex and six others – Elton John, David Furnish, Liz Hurley, Sadie Frost, Baroness (Doreen) Lawrence of Clarendon and Simon Hughes – who had not proved unlawful information-gathering. The Duke of Sussex's people said he would stay at Buckingham Palace during his five-day visit to England, but Buckingham Palace said he wouldn't, as he'd left it too late to reply to his invitation.

The non-custodial sentences for two boys convicted of raping two teenage girls in Fordingbridge, Hampshire, were overturned at the Court of Appeal by the Lady Chief Justice, Lady Carr of Walton-on-the-Hill, who gave them four years' detention. Twana Jamal, a people-smuggler given a five-year jail sentence in France in 2016, was found by the BBC living in Blaby, Leicestershire, and believed to be seeking asylum while working illegally. Lord Mackay of Clashfern, Lord Chancellor 1987-97, died aged 99. Pubs stayed open till 5 a.m. for customers to see England beat Mexico 3-2 in the World Cup.

Sir Keir Starmer, the Prime Minister, acknowledging that his 'political career is over', said he would be 'keeping my mouth shut, rather than giving constant advice to my successor'. In a ballot, 76 per cent of consultants belonging to the British Medical Association voted to strike in the next year if necessary. EasyJet agreed in principle to a takeover worth about £5.5 billion by Castlelake, an American investment company.

Abroad

Nato leaders met in Ankara as Russia increased its air strikes on Ukraine, launching the 'most massive attack' on Kyiv in the current war, with ballistic and cruise missiles and drones destroying flats and killing at least 30 people on one night while 52,500 took refuge in metro stations. During attacks on Kyiv three days later, Ukraine said that a 'serious shortage' of interceptor missiles meant none of the 23 ballistic missiles fired by Russia were shot down. Ukraine hit the St Petersburg oil terminal and the Russian Baltic Fleet base at Kronstadt, and left most of Crimea without lights. A woman suspected of a parcel-bombing in Monaco that wounded a sanctioned Ukrainian multi-millionaire was shot dead in Ukraine. Reports citing US intelligence said that Russia was planning an armed 'provocation' in Poland to test Nato. Germany planned to borrow €838 billion by 2030 to raise defence spending.

Hundreds of thousands gathered in Iran for a week of funeral rites for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, with ceremonies extending to Najaf and Karbala in Iraq; Mojtaba Khamenei, his son, the present Supreme Leader, did not appear. Iran and the United States exchanged air strikes. Taylor Swift, 36, the singer, married Travis Kelce, the American football player, also 36, privately, with 1,000 guests at the 20,000-capacity Madison Square Garden arena in New York. America celebrated its 250th anniversary of independence. President Donald Trump of America asked Fifa to review the one-match suspension of the US striker Folarin Balogun at the World Cup; Fifa suspended the suspension, but the United States were still knocked out of the competition by Belgium. Microsoft said it had cut 4,800 jobs (2.1 per cent of its workforce). Samsung Electronics estimated a 19-fold jump in profits because of demand for AI memory chips.

A Paris court upheld the conviction for embezzlement of Marine Le Pen, the parliamentary leader of the National Rally; she would have to wear an electronic tag but said she would appeal and stand for President. Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of the disgraced President Alberto Fujimori, was declared victor in Peru's presidential election, winning 50.135 per cent of votes to the left-wing candidate's 49.865 per cent. West Bengal replaced eggs in free school lunches with vegan food. CSH

DIARY

Oliver Shah

I left the *Sunday Times* a year ago to create a CEO reputation advisory firm. Sir Philip Green, the former retail tycoon with whom I fought a running battle, apparently rang a mutual friend and said: 'I hear he's going into PR – he should try adding ICK to that.' More constructive advice came from a property entrepreneur, who told me that my emotional and financial volatility was about to be 'massively heightened'. That turned out to be very true. When the methadone of your final PAYE payslip cuts out, reality kicks in. But winning clients, and looking after them, is amazingly rewarding. And even when you have a bad day, it's your bad day.

Newcome Advisory celebrated its first birthday last week. We managed to choose not only the same date as *The Spectator*'s summer party but the evening of England's game against DR Congo. Unpatriotically, I prayed for a clear result either way by full time. Despite my fears, we filled the splendid courtyard garden of C. Hoare & Co on Fleet Street with the great, the good and the fourth estate, including cabinet secretary Antonia Romeo, Babcock chair Dame Ruth Cairnie and Thames Water chairman Sir Adrian Montague. Thanking early supporters, I gave a speech channelling that famous philosophical tract *Ratatouille*. In the Disney Pixar film, Anton Ego, a restaurant critic known for his excoriating reviews, is served a transformative dish (ratatouille, obviously) by newcomer rodent chef Remy. Back in his garret, Ego reflects: 'In many ways, the work of a critic is easy… But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defence of the new. The world is often unkind to new talents, new creations. The new needs friends.'

One such friend is Suki Sandhu, the founder of Audeliss Executive Search and my co-host at Hoare's. Suki is the most flamboyant headhunter – indeed, perhaps the most flamboyant man – in London. He is also responsible for one of the best things to have happened at any of my parties. It was at Claridge's, before the last election, and Labour was

in the ascendant. Suki was taking giddy selfies with Rachel Reeves. 'Oh my God, Rachel, I would totally vote Labour,' Suki exclaimed (I hope he won't mind my mentioning that he's gay, but this was said in a camp falsetto that made the following even more amusing). Reeves blinked and gargled her appreciation. Suki paused. 'I mean, I would if I hadn't moved to Jersey for tax reasons.' More frantic blinking.

Reeves now looks likely to be demoted as chancellor if Andy Burnham is crowned. This might allow the King of the North to reverse, at least partially, the policy most hated by business: her £25 billion raid on employers' national insurance contributions, which has been an extra hand around the throats of the already spluttering hospitality and leisure industries. But I worry that Burnham and the new occupant of No. 11 would be tempted to fund that through higher taxes on capital. Louise Haigh, a key Burnham ally, argued last month that 'unproductive' capital should be brought into line with income, tax-wise. Having started a business with my own savings and being about to employ someone, I find this failure to understand the relationship between the two baffling. Capital is the acorn from which jobs sprout, which is why nourishing it is essential. And, per the relocation of Suki and thousands of others like him, it is more mobile than ever.

Leaving a Sunday paper after 15 years is a bit like the ending of *The Shawshank Redemption*. You stumble, delirious, onto a bright beach of Friday-night dinners and weekends away. At the end of last month we braved the *canicule,* the pleasing French word for heatwave, and took the Eurostar to Paris for the Matisse exhibition at the Grand Palais, a blockbuster on a par with the Hockney retrospective at the Fondation Louis Vuitton last year. I remember Andy Street, then in charge of John Lewis, getting into *l'eau chaude* in 2014 for describing France as 'sclerotic, hopeless and downbeat'. French politics has become only more sclerotic since then, but Paris is enjoying a long post-Olympics high, overflowing with tourists and new restaurants. In recent years it has been London's turn to endure overblown headlines about knife crime and no-go zones. I am a long-term bull on our fair capital and know that, like its cousin across the Channel, it will flower again.

Oliver Shah is the founder of Newcome Advisory and former associate editor of the Sunday Times.

Burnham's beauty pageant

Warm wine, small talk and curling canapés have long defined the Westminster summer scene. But regime change has added a certain frisson to the party circuit this year. As many of Labour's finest toasted America's semiquincentennial at the US ambassador's house last week, the hostility radiating from Keir Starmer's No. 10 team was unmistakable.

'I've had them shooting daggers at me all night,' complained one rebel MP, amid toasts to the revolution. 'It's over guys, you lost.' As fireworks exploded overhead, another added: 'The king is dead, long live the king.'

The Prime Minister's decision to step down, paving the way for Andy Burnham's coronation, has spared his party plenty of pyrotechnics. Yet even the most stoic Starmtroopers struggle to conceal their contempt at the great rush to the Burnham cause. Labour's church-like qualities have often been remarked upon. The party's history books and the memoirs of its former leaders are peppered with talk of values, crusades and the faithful. But there is a slight whiff of the televangelist to some of the rhapsodising by newly converted Burnhamites. 'Half of these people were begging us for jobs just a moment ago,' grumbles one government aide.

Plenty of ambitious MPs are making what one Burnhamite calls 'pilgrimages' to see his key allies, pledging fealty, seeking truth and atoning for past sins. His two disciples are Louise Haigh, the former transport secretary, and James Purnell, his chief of staff. The former is advising on ministerial gigs, the latter on backroom staff.

Amid tearoom gossip about which MPs are exaggerating their northern accents, older hands ask if the current kumbaya spirit will dissipate in a fortnight's time when the new cabinet is announced. 'They're quickly learning that 403 does not go into 21,' says one veteran, referring to the number of Labour MPs and cabinet posts available.

Burnham dislikes this jockeying, but his lack of firm preferences incentivises such behaviour. 'Everyone thinks it's in their interest to essentially be in Andy's face all the time,' says an aide. With the great Labour beauty pageant now in full swing, a range of different approaches are being tried by ministers keen to cling on to their red boxes.

The first are the briefers: those uncertain of their status, keen to press their claims. Those closest to Rachel Reeves have made foreboding noises about the bond market's reaction if she was removed as Chancellor. Allies of Emma Reynolds, the Environment Secretary, have taken to punting around op-eds which make her case. 'One can only hope that her outward support for Sir Keir will not be held against her,' says one. Friends of James Murray, the Health Secretary, speak admiringly of 'his professional, calm, firm' approach to the resident doctors' strikes. Even Lord Hermer has his admirers in the Tribune group of soft-left MPs.

Next, there are the up-and-comers: those confident of preference under the new regime. Some are members of the 'Manc Mafia', such as Lisa Nandy, who is tipped for the local government brief, and Jonathan Reynolds, who has endured a challenging spell in the whips' office. Deputy leader Lucy Powell reportedly has her eye on Bridget Phillipson's brief in education. Should Burnham find that there are too few posts to go around, then running the party – and picking a new general secretary – could serve as a substitute gig. Angela Rayner is said to be 'relaxed' about her fate, though her chief of staff, Nick Parrott, is currently offering informal advice to the Burnham camp.

Plenty of ambitious MPs are making what one Burnhamite calls 'pilgrimages' to see his allies

Next there are the party men, the reserved middle-hitters of the cabinet, who watch with a degree of resignation. The likes of David Lammy can talk fondly of old ties with Burnham; Alan Campbell, the wily Leader of the House, might well take Reynolds's job as chief whip. Some, such as Nick Thomas-Symonds, the Europe negotiator, could be useful to the Burnham project, if his recent brush with the ethics watchdog is not held against him. Finally, there are a small handful who seem to have accepted their fate, such as Peter Kyle, Steve Reed and Baroness Chapman.

Of all the cabinet appointments, none will be more important than who runs the Treasury. Within the City, there is a determined 'stop Ed Miliband' lobbying campaign under way. 'The message being sent to Burnham is that if he picks Miliband, the government will be immediately in crisis mode with a chancellor who is seen as actively hostile to business and economic reality,' remarks a plugged-in figure. A copy of 'Go Big' – Miliband's 2021 manifesto – recently arrived on a leading hedge fund manager's desk. Key economic advisers Andy Haldane and Jim O'Neill are both being lobbied, amid near-universal opposition from the banking sector.

Ideology is one factor determining Burnham's decisions; identity is another. If Burnham does indeed make half his cabinet female, then it will be a 'bad day to be a bloke', says one pale, stale, male Labour aide. Just as his route to power was aided by northern and female MPs angry at Starmer's 'boys' club', Burnham will have to take care not to reawaken old fears of Labour's 'southern discomfort' by jettisoning too many MPs in other parts of England.

Many of the junior aides within government are expected to be asked to stay on, just like the last Labour handover in No. 10 in 2007. Team Burnham has remained largely tight-lipped on personnel plans – though eyebrows have been raised at briefings around the role of Hayden Munro, billed as 'Jacinda Ardern's election-winning campaign director'. One New Zealand Labour source says: 'If he's after a job in Downing Street, let's hope they don't get references.'

Burnham's coronation has limited any public criticism of his plans. For all the talk of Labour's different traditions, there is no rival band waiting to take over if he fails, as the Sunakites did with the Trussites in 2022. He has promised a politics of devolution, community and civic renewal. Now comes the harder task: proving his ambition was justified. In a party that owes more to Methodism than to Marx, Labour is wagering that Manchesterism is more than the musings of one man.

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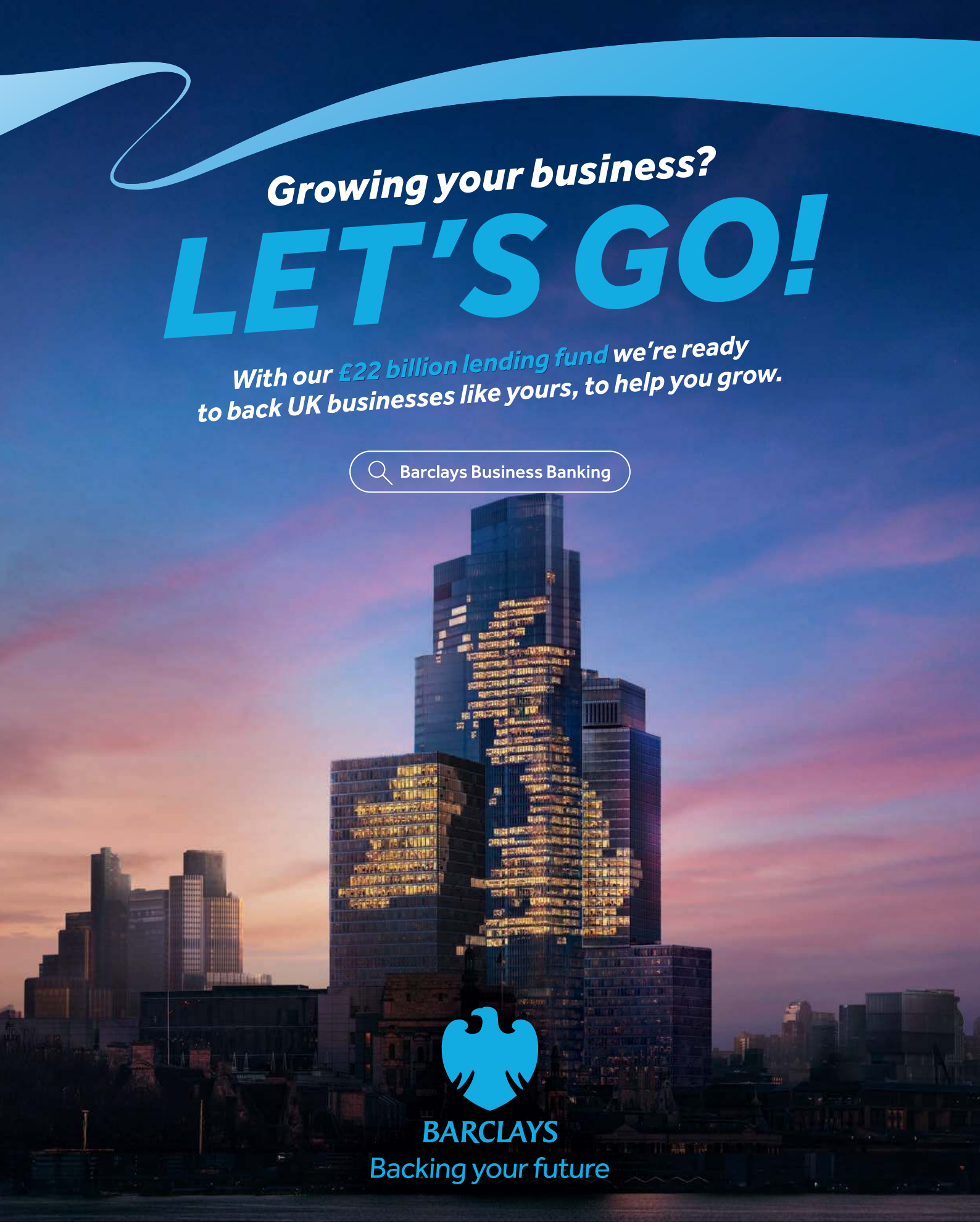
2. Please also note the "NAV per share" percentages in the table above reflect the US dollar monthly estimated NAV per share.
3. HVPE introduced an additional US dollar share price on 10 December 2018; from this date onwards, the actual US dollar share price, as reported by the London Stock Exchange, has been used. Prior to this date, the US dollar share price had been converted from the sterling share price at the prevailing exchange rate.
   The share price total return figures have been adjusted for the redemptions which occurred in October 2013 and October 2014.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THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore

At about 2 p.m. on Tuesday, two cases with a common characteristic coincided. One was Nigel Farage's long statement about why he would resign his seat to fight a by-election. The other was the defeat of the privacy action against the *Daily Mail* brought by Prince Harry and others. The link is not in content, but in attitude. In both cases, the main actors in the drama are paranoid and solipsistic. Mr Farage, trying to deflect questions about the men who give him money, spoke for about 20 minutes of the wrongs done him by the 'Establishment' and the media. He was particularly worked up about his security. The Prince's case was that he had been intruded upon by dark and powerful media forces. It was all mixed up with his resentments against his father the King and his courtiers. He too is obsessed with his security. Both politician and prince felt the need to inflict their anger upon a wider public – Mr Farage by seeking unnecessary re-endorsement by the voters of Clacton, the Duke of Sussex by exhaustively litigating what was not, as the judge decided, a matter of law. Both men preferred emotion to evidence. Both sought the spotlight on the big day: Mr Farage by his declaration and Prince Harry by his botched attempt to get a berth in Buckingham Palace while in town. If the King had granted his son's wish, the Prince might then have gained, conceivably in front of the palace gates, a stage set from which to reignite his stuttering insurgency. The Prince has now decisively failed. I suspect the politician will fail too. Many sympathise with Prince Harry over the fundamental sadness of his life. Many agree with Mr Farage's bold attacks on the failures of successive Conservative and Labour governments. But most are also tired of men whose self-centredness hogs the public space.

One must hope that Andy Burnham, previously sympathetic to the litigious celebrities, is feeling a bit hacked off with Hacked Off.

Reform's strange offer to pay for the Clacton by-election shows the stirrings of a guilty conscience. If the party really thought the escapade was in the public interest, why would it do that? On the other hand, I hope the government does not exercise its technically valid power of refusing Mr Farage's application for stewardship of the Manor of Northstead. The histories of Wilkes, Bradlaugh and Tony Benn suggest it is unwise to try to keep duly elected people out. It would be equally unwise to insist on keeping them in.

My generation, born in the late 1950s, now begins to remember the famous words of Psalm 90: 'The days of our years are threescore years and ten.' Last week, 150 of us were privileged to attend an extraordinary party. It was given by James Stourton, distinguished author, former chairman of Sotheby's and 6ft 8in in height. When I met him in his first year at Cambridge 50 years ago, he had contrived to occupy a don's set and to have printed on his own press a beautiful anthology called *A Watch of Nightingales*. James, now 70, celebrated by giving us dinner at Syon which, though in west London, remains a country house surrounded by 200 acres, and by completing and printing his own memoir, *The Nursery Screen*. It includes an astonishingly powerful, though not bitter, account of his battles with his snobbish, alcoholic parents who tried to force him into the army and deprive him of inheritances. James is someone who, in current parlance, 'curates' his own life. But the birthday dinner had none of the complacency that can mar such events, because of two additional features. The first was that James has just married Dr Verity Mackenzie, a Cambridge art historian 30 years his junior. The second is that earlier this year he contracted a rare blood cancer, with what he calls a 'not terribly thrilling life expectancy'. Verity nobly shares his isolation in Guy's Hospital for the course of his chemotherapy. Their wedding took place there. James says she gives him the greatest happiness of his life. It had been doubtful whether they could attend their own party, but they did, sitting together and, to avoid infection, not moving among the guests. James was too weak to speak, so his words were read out by his cousin Edward, the broadcaster. Nicholas Coleridge was called best man. As dinner finished, James made to leave, leaning on Verity. The great doors of Syon's hall were thrown open and suddenly a rushing mighty wind dispersed the stuffiness of the heatwave. We cheered as the couple, silhouetted against the last rays of day, waved and went off into the sunset. The moment was filmic: I imagined the words 'THE END' projected on to the walls. Yet not the end: we saw confirmed, in 'real time', the old message that while there is life, there is hope.

When the Blair government inaugurated the 21st century by expelling most hereditary peers from the House of Lords, Lord Salisbury, leader of the Tory peers, kindly gave a 'wake' for them and made space at Hatfield for the commemorative planting of a 'Wake Wood'. Now that the previously 'exempted' minority of hereditaries has been ejected by Sir Keir Starmer, the same Salisbury gave them a farewell lunch, joined by friendly life peers of all parties and none, on Monday. It was symbolically appropriate that the house, currently being used as a filmset for a drama in which Hatfield plays the Cecilienhof at the Potsdam Conference of 1945, had a Soviet flag waving over us as we entered. The only Labour peer present was the magnificent Lord Glasman, whose 'Blue Labour' ideology puts him firmly to the right of everyone else present. Lord Salisbury quoted Burke on the contract between the dead, the living and the unborn. Lord True, current leader of the Tory peers, presented him with a single commemorative oak. This *Quercus robur* should outlast the levelling spirit of the age.

Circus trick

Can Nigel Farage take back control?

TIM SHIPMAN

When Reform high command gathered in the boardroom of their Millbank headquarters last Tuesday, the meeting was supposed to be to select candidates in their 120 most winnable seats and choose dozens of campaign managers. It went on for six hours, as party chiefs instead addressed a growing sense of unease that the great momentum of 2025 has been lost.

A source familiar with the discussions reveals that Chris Bruni-Lowe, Nigel Farage's pollster and message man, has been concerned for months that Reform needs to do something big to 'take back control'. 'Chris challenged people, saying things aren't working the way they need to,' the source says. 'James Orr [the head of policy], Rob Jenrick [the shadow chancellor] and Zia [Yusuf, the home affairs spokesman] were all asked for their best ideas, but nothing much was forthcoming.' It was at this point, the source says, that Farage said words to the effect of: 'It's time to put my own testicles on the line.' A Reform source says: 'Since about February there has been a growing feeling that we were becoming a party which was no longer in command of its own destiny as we would wish to be. Restore is growing. Every innovation we made in political technology was nicked and adopted by the other parties.'

Farage's desire to act was intensified by reports in the *Sunday Times* over the weekend that his friend 'Posh George' Cottrell, a convicted fraudster, had paid for his security before he became an MP and let Farage stay in his London home – neither of which Farage had declared as benefits in kind to the parliamentary authorities. He was already under fire for failing to register a £5 million gift from the billionaire Christopher Harborne, whose crypto interests he has backed as party leader. Both matters are now the subject of investigations by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

The final straw came when Sky News and other broadcasters 'doorstepped' Farage's daughter at her home, after pictures of the house appeared in the *Times*. A longstanding friend of Farage says: 'I've never seen him so furious. He has never, ever used his children. Most voters don't even know he has children.'

Farage announced on Tuesday that he would resign his seat in Clacton and fight a 'People vs the Establishment' by-election, arguing it is for his constituents, not the political powers that be, to decide if he represents them. This will pause the inquiry, but it can resume if he is re-elected. If the standards committee recommends a suspension of ten sitting days or more, he could face a recall petition and a second by-election.

It was at this point he said words to the effect of: 'It's time to put my own testicles on the line'

Farage's calculation is that such a move would look like the Establishment ganging up on him. His team already know how they will campaign if that happens. Since the 2016 referendum he and his deputy Richard Tice have planned to fight a second EU vote with the slogan 'Tell them again'. There is no seat in the country they are better prepared to contest: when Douglas Carswell (the former MP for Clacton) defected from the Tories to Ukip in 2014 he took with him a computer containing years' worth of canvassing data. '[Farage] sees himself in a David and Goliath battle with the Establishment and this is his slingshot,' says an ally. 'I reckon there is a fair chance it will take Goliath in the middle of the forehead.'

Shortly after Farage finished speaking, he got a call from David Davis, the former Brexit secretary who resigned his seat in 2008 and fought a by-election on the erosion of civil liberties. 'Copycat!' said Davis, a friend of Farage. 'This makes you my protégé.' Farage just laughed.

What Reform did not perhaps anticipate was that the main parties would react as they had done to Davis, by standing down and leaving Farage alone to fight the comedy candidate Count Binface. This denies Farage the cathartic showdown he wanted. 'They're cowards,' a Reform source says. 'They know he'll win.'

The Tories, Labour and Rupert Lowe's party Restore Britain all say they will only fight a second by-election – proof to Reform aides that they are in cahoots. Even when most people were ignoring Restore, US strategist Gerry Gunster, who also advises Farage, identified them as a looming danger. 'Restore is a Tory put-up job, expertly organised by Gavin Williamson,' says a Reform source. Sir Gavin, a former Tory chief whip who won his Westminster seat in 2024 in curious circumstances after the Reform candidate stood aside at the last moment, denies that he is the Midlands' answer to Machiavelli. 'Not true,' he says.

But the claim highlights the degree to which Lowe is living rent-free in Reform heads and the degree to which they still see the Tories as an establishment conspiring against them.

You wouldn't know it from much of what passes for political debate in this country, but two things are true. Yes, many figures in the Establishment are out to get Farage. Some are peddling text messages to media outlets

about his private life. But it is also the case that even sage voices in Reform think that their leader would have been wiser to declare the £5 million gift, and believe his team have handled the fallout badly. A Farage ally who thinks he should have been more transparent explains: 'When you have been vilified as much as he has, he is not inclined to give his enemies any advantage at all.'

Outsiders struggle to understand why he remains loyal to Cottrell, who was jailed in the US for wire fraud and has just published a book about how to launder money. Cottrell has accompanied Farage to meetings with foreign diplomats and blue-chip company bosses. 'He just barges in and asserts himself,' says one City source. 'These people are quizzical and shocked that he is there. It holds back businesses from engaging.'

However, Reform insiders say Farage is a 'father figure' to Cottrell and to Dan Jukes, an aide who has been with him for a decade. 'Because George and Dan are totally sure of their positions, they give Nigel good advice based on what's in his interests,' says one. Another source contrasts Cottrell to others who are 'paranoid and egotistical maniacs who spend their time fighting internal battles about who gets to fly with Nigel'.

So has the refusal of the main parties to join the fight in Clacton scuppered Farage? I don't think so. There has always been a tension between Farage the insurgent and Farage the prime-minister-in-waiting. The desire to seem as though he was taking preparations for government seriously peaked earlier this year with a series of defections by Tories with cabinet experience and plans by Danny Kruger to work out what Reform would do with power. But this has not won over polite opinion or much of the Tory press. Tuesday's gambit suggests Farage wants to return to what he knows best: talking directly to his target voters through videos and social media.

He wants to return to what he knows best: talking directly to target voters through videos and social media

Inside Reform, Farage is seen as a modern John Wilkes, the radical journalist who was elected as MP for Middlesex in the 1768 general election, was expelled from parliament as unfit to hold office and saw three by-elections in 1769 overturned by fiat. Wilkes argued that it was for the people of Middlesex to decide their MP, not the political establishment. There were protests in the streets and, in 1774, Wilkes was elected Lord Mayor of London and returned to parliament.

In essence, Farage's move shows he understands that politics is only partly a game of rules: it is mostly a contest of perceptions. 'He knows this is a game of psychology and comparative narratives,' an ally says. 'He knows that if he is backed by the people of Clacton and he has commanded a whole bunch of front pages, he will have won.'

The front pages may be in shorter supply now that Clacton is not a competitive contest, but calling this by-election is about putting his argument to the voters that he and they must once more put two fingers up to the Establishment. The established parties of SW1 have refused to dance to Farage's tune. His calculation is that his target voters will hear it anyway.

'There's going to be a big push to rejoin the EU'

DOMINIC CUMMINGS

In January, Dominic Cummings, Boris Johnson's former chief adviser, joined The Spectator*'s* Quite right! *podcast. This week, Nigel Farage suggested that 'perhaps Dominic Cummings was right… when he said Whitehall will break the law to stop Reform winning power'. Cummings was one of the first to predict what troubles lay ahead for Reform. You can read his edited remarks here.*

Think about what the old system will do to stop Nigel Farage getting in. It's not going to be politics as usual. Keir Starmer has already signalled this, when he says that he can live with the Tories winning, but he can't live with Farage winning. The people around Starmer and all through the upper echelons of the Whitehall system are looking at Donald Trump. They're looking across Europe and they're saying to themselves: 'The lesson is to strike early and strike hard and not let these people in. We should never have let Vote Leave win the referendum on Brexit. That was the beginning of the disaster for us. We can't make this mistake again. Let's smash the absolute living shit out of Farage, and make sure that he doesn't win, by fair means and foul.' They will leak medical records. They will leak tax records. They will bug his phone and leak that. They will do anything that they need to.

That's going to be happening all across Europe in parallel. And they will all be telling themselves that they're fighting fascism. The European Commission has said publicly that they will use the tactics that they use for colour revolutions in eastern Europe to stop western European countries being taken over by parties that they don't agree with. That is the official doctrine of the European Commission, and they will definitely try and do it.

They're saying it on the record: it's the opposite of conspiratorial. They have conferences by Lake Como to discuss how to do it. Over the next year, we're going to have the Russiagate hoax coming back. Lots of people will be saying: 'Where's Carole Cadwalladr? Why did no one pay attention to her?' Rory Stewart, Alastair Campbell and co are going to push for real investigations, this time into Brexit and the Russians. We will look at it initially and think it's insane, that it won't go anywhere. Then to mounting horror, [will come] the realisation that it actually is going to go somewhere.

There's going to be an all-out attempt to decapitate Farage. His tax returns, his medical information: they will use the intelligence services and leak a bunch of shit that they would not normally do.

The big lesson they take away from the past ten years is not 'we should have listened to the voters'. It's that we should have jailed them all early, we should never have let Elon Musk buy Twitter.

What will Whitehall and Labour be hearing from their Democrat friends in London? 'Strike early, strike hard. Don't be squeamish. Just crush all of this shit, jail them all, they're fascist. We have to destroy democracy to save democracy.'

Overall, the big picture is going to be a big push to rejoin the EU, and there's going to be a big push for censorship. The whole lesson of the past ten years is that the system will never admit failure. The system will not change direction. It will only keep going. Everyone is racist. So: rejoin, censorship, and change the electoral system. The electoral system will lock everything in together. That way, there's no escape.

Listen now: spectator.com/quiteright

Scroll position

Inside Labour's plot to sideline alternative media

JOHN POWER

Labour came to power in 2024 with five stated missions: to improve economic growth, the NHS, street safety, clean energy and the distribution of opportunity. If Keir Starmer had been honest about his plans, he would have pledged just one – restricting access to social media.

This is the goal the government has pursued obsessively. Starmer turned to it as his premiership collapsed around him, imposing a social media ban for under-16s. As Andy Burnham seizes the reins, he will have to grapple with divisions in his party over defence and welfare – but his MPs remain united in their crusade against so-called online harms.

That is why Liz Kendall, the Technology Secretary, is talking about a 'final decision' on our right to access VPNs, why Lisa Nandy, the Culture Secretary, has made a show of leaving X and why Lucy Powell, the Labour deputy leader, wants to restrict what can be posted on social media during election campaigns. Forget net zero – in 2026, the easiest way to virtue-signal is to declare your contempt for online freedoms.

A green paper published recently by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport indicates that alternative media, which thrives in the online world, is next in the government's sights. The document is the culmination of a long lobbying exercise by broadcast media to re-establish dominance over the information ecosystem. There is the usual saccharine fluff about how TV shows such as *Adolescence* can 'give voice to our national story' and the faintly Soviet role of television to 'bring the nation together for shared experiences'. There is whingeing about how the 'consumption of content in individually curated feeds is eroding the shared cultural and societal experiences associated with traditional broadcasting'. It is assumed that we are being made worse off by having choice over what we watch, as if people should be yearning for the halcyon days of *Top of the Pops* and *The Generation Game*, instead of thanking God that they were born too late to bear witness to such horrors.

We are told that 'in countries with strong and well-funded systems of public service media, societal polarisation is lower'. The report referenced for this claim is by the European Broadcasting Union, an international group that lobbies for various broadcasters including the BBC and ITV. The public version of the report does not include any data sets, but the claim does not stand up to scrutiny. In fact, many countries where per capita funding of national broadcasters is lower, such as Japan and New Zealand, have lower polarisation scores than the UK. If broadcasters really are vital for 'bringing us together', then ours aren't cost-effective.

Although the recommendations have not been formalised – we will have to wait for a full white paper later this year for that – there is a clear policy direction. The green paper promises legislation to establish a 'prominence regime' for 'trustworthy news content'. In plain English, this means the government wants to fiddle the algorithms so that 'trustworthy' news providers are favoured over independent media.

Misinformation is a problem, but it would be wrong to pretend the legacy media is without sin

The green paper says there will be a transparent method for deciding who is trustworthy and that there will be a process of stakeholder engagement to decide how the method works. The selected stakeholders will inevitably be charities and lobbyists who are intertwined with broadcast media, and the document gives some clue as to what metrics they might use to judge trustworthiness. We are told that audiences still value 'content that reflects the diversity of the UK and brings audiences together'. Meaning, presumably, that making 'divisive content' or operating without appropriate obeisance to diversity checklists will count against you in the government-regulated algorithm.

Another peccadillo is the 'integral role' broadcasters play in driving growth outside London and the south-east, so you can chuck levelling up into the mind-numbing social engineering projects which this framework will reward instead of, say, being entertaining, funny or interesting.

There will be some readers who share ministers' anxieties about alternative media. Misinformation is a problem, but it would be wrong to pretend the legacy media is without sin. It was the BBC that doctored a speech by Donald Trump. It was the BBC that created a 'misinformation service', BBC Verify, which concocted a story about 'ethnicity penalties' issued by insurers in racially diverse areas. And it was the BBC that selected Marianna Spring, a woman who included falsehoods on her CV, to be the face of that misinformation service.

Leaked memos from within the BBC recently revealed that the organisation experienced 'effective censorship' of its trans coverage because of internal activism. While the corporation was inviting Stonewall in to help with its 'Diversity Champions' scheme, the real resistance to gender ideology began its life on social media. Sceptical parents, clinicians and teachers organised first on Facebook, and later on forums such as Mumsnet, years before the right-wing print press and the Conservative party finally got a handle on the matter. They often used the cloak of digital anonymity, because to publicly admit to 'transphobic' views could mean losing your job – or even lead to a visit from the police. It is this mechanism for collective action against political correctness that ministers seem intent on destroying. They will do so by forcing adults to submit their IDs to use the internet, banning the VPNs they might use to circumvent the checks and limiting the discoverability of controversial information whose content they decide does not 'bring the nation together'.

In the free marketplace of content, there is a place for legacy media just as there is a place for alternative media. But we should always be sceptical of expensive lobbying efforts to impose regulations that will tip the scale in favour of established institutions. And we should be downright cynical when these regulations are being enacted by a government that has shown unrelenting contempt for free speech.

MARY WAKEFIELD

British policing has descended into farce

I'm not sure why I started following the photographer Alastair Hilton on X. He's right-ish politically, so perhaps the algorithm just blew him my way. But through the rising tide of online bilge, I still seek out and enjoy Hilton's posts, mostly because he talks about pubs and posts pictures of cold pints on hot days.

Hilton has a narrowboat on the Thames in Chiswick and seems to half live in the bars along the river, so he was extremely cross about a recent proposal to remove the tables and chairs from the riverside, especially from his local pub, the Bell and Crown. Last week he posted a video in which he said that the word on the Chiswick street is that getting rid of the outdoor seating was the sneaky pet project of a local Green party councillor, Rick Rowe, who lives Thamesside with his boyfriend and dislikes the noise – though you'd have thought a local councillor would support a struggling pub.

Well, most of us are a long way from W4, and I wouldn't dream of leading you down a rabbit hole into local Chiswick politics, were it not for the fact that soon after Hilton's pub-seating tweet, two policemen visited him. They walked up to his table as he sat, as usual, outside with a drink, and very clearly warned him off tweeting about councillor Rick. Hilton filmed the whole weird encounter, and if you find him on X you can watch it online.

No crime had been committed, the lead cop agreed – they just wanted a little 'conversation' with Hilton about the fact that he had filmed the riverbank near Rowe's house.

'I'm a photographer, I deliberately didn't show his house… I've done nothing wrong,' says Hilton. Then, more urgently: 'Mate, you're being used as a hard man, to scare.'

'I'm not threatening you, I'm giving advice,' says the officer, looking down at Hilton. The lead copper had very much embraced the Met aesthetic: short beard, fresh fade haircut and a stab vest studded with gadgets. Interestingly though, the keys to his car, usually on an officer's belt, were attached by a carabiner at collar-height, which meant his name tag was hidden.

'But what is this about?' asks Hilton repeatedly. There was no crime, so 'why have two coppers come to speak to me?'

'As opposed to how many coppers?' asks the officer, clearly playing for time.

'As opposed to no coppers,' says Hilton.

A long-awaited report about what's gone wrong with British policing was published on Monday, and I've been thinking about it in light of Hilton's video. An inquiry chaired by Lords Blunkett and Herbert found – surprise – that policemen are badly trained and badly led, and are too fixated on rooting out racists and bigots. They need an 'ethical reset', it concluded, and to 'focus entirely on the prevention, detection and prosecution of crime'. 'Drop the woke ideology' is the message of the report. If only it were that simple.

Successive governments have presided over programmes that explicitly encouraged young policemen and women to think

The police need serious deprogramming, not a simple 'reset'

of their jobs as policing culture, not enforcing the law. Until a few years ago, the Met was signed up to Stonewall's Diversity Champions scheme, which awards points to companies that promote the LGBT crowd. This prompted the introduction of a number of mandatory police courses such as anti-racism training days and courses teaching intersectionality and promoting the belief system which says white, right and straight people must always be the aggressors.

It was plain weird, the way the main copper looked at Hilton. The whites of his eyes were showing, like a horse that's seen something flapping in a hedge, as if he thought Hilton might leap at him over the table,

'We aren't going to take sides.'

though he knew all Hilton had done was tweet. But then how could the lead cop wrap his mind around the notion that the middle-aged, white, pub-going Hilton, who had a history of tweeting disapprovingly about immigration, might be in the right?

Talk of 'an ethical reset' makes it seem as if someone just has to push a button and a decade of brainwashing will be undone. But the police need serious deprogramming, not a simple 'reset'. Any twenty-something officer has been taught from school age that words can equate to 'literal violence'. How can they then be expected suddenly to understand the vital importance of free speech?

I promised not to drag you into Chiswick politics, but it might be interesting for you, if not for the police, to know that although Rowe insists he was absolutely not behind any attempt to get the pub's outdoor seating removed, and that the sound of happy Conservative voters knocking back Chablis by the Thames only fills his heart with joy, that doesn't seem to be an entirely undisputed account of events. I enjoy a ferret around in other people's business and I've found indirect quotes from another councillor who is of the view that Rowe 'got the ball rolling' on looking into the validity of the pub's outdoor licences. And Rowe himself (if you believe Hilton) seems to have almost outed himself as the prime mover behind the menacing appearance of the lead cop and his silent sidekick.

I only saw it a few days later, but that same evening, an obviously shaken Hilton posted another tweet. Rowe, he said, had come into the pub with his boyfriend and had 'let it slip' to Hilton that 'he has been given my personal information by the police'. The Met said in a statement that it had received a report from an 'elected official' about 'malicious communications, harassment and public order concerns'. 'If I do not post on here in the morning,' wrote Hilton, 'it means that the police have again acted on the orders of a Green party candidate and have arrested me… seriously, please kick up a fuss.'

The police have wisely retreated from the riverside scene. But if they get involved again, it'll be a reliable sign that they've taken not a blind bit of notice of any Police Leadership Commission report.

BAROMETER

To go or not to go?

Would Andy Burnham be wise to call a general election? The record of PMs since 1945 who took office mid-term:
Anthony Eden called an election straight away and increased the Conservatives' majority to 60.
Alec Douglas-Home waited almost a year after taking office. Lost his majority.
James Callaghan didn't call an election until three years after taking office, when he lost to Margaret Thatcher.
John Major didn't call an election for 16 months, when the parliamentary term was nearly up. Won on a reduced majority of 21.
Gordon Brown blinked when he might have called an election in autumn of 2007. Didn't do so until 2010. Lost his majority.
Theresa May called an election roughly nine months after taking office. Lost the Conservative majority but stayed on in a minority administration.
Boris Johnson called an election after three months. Won an 80-seat majority.
Rishi Sunak called an election 19 months after becoming PM, six months before he needed to. Went down to the biggest Conservative defeat in modern times.

Seeing red

Which World Cups saw the most red cards?
2006, Germany.....**28**
1998, France.....**22**
2002, South Korea/Japan.....**17**
1990, Italy.....**16**
1994, USA.....**15**
No red cards were awarded in either the 1950 or the 1970 World Cup. Four were awarded in 2018 and 2022.

Ups and downs

How reliable are lifts at railway stations?
– As of 31 March 2026 there were **1,403** lifts at **540** stations.
– Between 12 October 2025 and 31 March 2026 there were **4,307** faults, a rate of 3.07 per lift, down from 3.21 in the previous reporting periods.
– Passengers were trapped in lifts on **304** occasions.
– The average lift took **21.3** hours to repair.
Source: Office of Rail and Road

Traveller tales

How many traveller caravans are there in England?
– As of January 2026, there were **29,402**. **17,973** were on authorised, privately owned sites; **6,479** were on authorised, public-owned sites; **4,950** were on unauthorised sites. Of these, **4,335** were on land owned by the travellers themselves.
Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

All at See

The Vatican vs the Society of St Pius X

DAMIAN THOMPSON

As any Catholic master of ceremonies will tell you, it takes only the tiniest sartorial mishap to lend a Python-esque flavour to moments of the utmost solemnity.

On 1 July the rebel traditionalist Society of St Pius X (SSPX) created four new bishops in defiance of Pope Leo XIV during a five-hour open-air Latin Mass in a Swiss alpine meadow. The consecrating prelates wore dark-red velvet chasubles over scarlet-and-gold dalmatics with matching gloves. They descended from their thrones bearing sacred chrism. Afterwards the new bishops stood in a row, mitres perched on their heads for the first time.

For traditionalist Catholic bishops – whether they are cardinals loyal to the Pope, prelates of tiny rebel sects or, like the SSPX, somewhere in between – size matters when it comes to mitres. Liberal bishops wear stumpy headgear scarcely distinguishable from tea cosies. 'Trads' favour gleaming skyscrapers that look magnificent so long as they fit properly.

Liberal bishops wear stumpy headgear. 'Trads' favour gleaming skyscrapers

That was the problem. Two bishops wore their Shard-shaped mitres at a jaunty angle; one gust of wind and they might impale a worshipper. The others were taking no risks. Older readers may remember the 1960s comedian Freddie 'Parrot Face' Davies, who jammed his bowler hat down so low that his ears stuck out. That was the unfortunate effect.

Mainstream Catholics had fun with this on social media, but on Saturday it was the SSPX's turn to snigger. Pope Leo, who the day after the consecrations made clear that all six of the Society's bishops were excommunicated, together with any priests who failed to reconcile with Rome, pointedly spent 4 July at Lampedusa, gateway and grave of illegal migrants. Here he clambered awkwardly on to a rock ('you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church'), whereupon his skullcap flew off like a frisbee.

I shouldn't be flippant when, in theory, the fate of hundreds of thousands of souls hangs in the balance. But the history of relations between the Vatican and Écône, the SSPX's Swiss headquarters, is comically convoluted. The Society has been half-in and half-out of the official Catholic Church ever since its founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, rejected the Second Vatican Council's 'heretical' ecumenism and what he regarded as the new Protestant form of Mass.

In 1988, just when a deal seemed possible, the haughty but indisputably holy Lefebvre rejected an offer that would have brought the SSPX back into the Church, free to celebrate the old liturgy so long as it paid lip service to the Council. Instead, he consecrated four bishops, for which schismatic act he was excommunicated along with the new bishops. At the same time, however, Pope John Paul II seized the opportunity to create the rival Fraternity of St Peter (FSSP), which allowed priests to use only the old Latin missal so long as they didn't repudiate Vatican II.

After Lefebvre's death in 1991, both the 'rebel' SSPX and the 'loyal' FSSP unexpectedly prospered. In an attempt to end this People's Liberation Front of Judea-style rivalry, Pope Benedict XVI lifted the excommunications of the four bishops. But the SSPX was now split between moderates and conspiracy theorists who believed that the new Mass was a Masonic charade, and so there was no healing. Then along came the Machiavellian Pope Francis, who inexplicably preferred truculent Lefebvrists to loyal Latin Mass Catholics. He granted SSPX

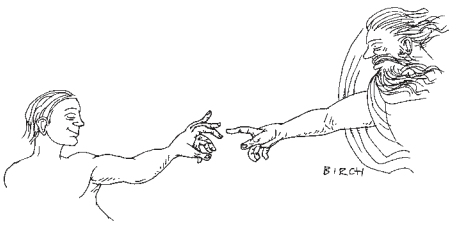
Fielding

priests permission to solemnise marriages and hear confessions. As a result, even cardinals could not agree whether the Society was in schism.

And now? On the face of it, last week's excommunication of the Lefebvrist bishops, together with priests and lay people who stubbornly 'adhere' to the Society, draws a red line between the Church and the rebels; SSPX priests can no longer validly conduct weddings or grant absolution. In practice, everything is fuzzy at the edges. In the past few days the Vatican has offered SSPX priests a route back to full communion which involves signing a document committing them to recognising the Council. No one has a clue how many will accept the offer.

As for lay people, there is no such thing as formal lay membership of the Society. Estimates of the number of Catholics who support the Lefebvrists range from 100,000 to 600,000 – a vast disparity that reflects confusion about what it means to 'adhere' to the rebels. If you continue occasionally attending SSPX Masses, are you excommunicated? Almost certainly not. But if you stubbornly insist that only their Masses are valid, then you probably are, having committed what Pope Leo calls 'a sin of extreme gravity' by tearing the seamless garment of Christ.

It's a mess. Even so, some of the fog is clearing from the battlefield. I was in Rome



God creates AI

just before the consecrations; the traditionalists I spoke to were startlingly hostile to Lefebvrists whom they'd previously regarded as honourably separated brethren.

'They tell the Pope they're taking this step with deep sorrow in their hearts,' said one Vatican insider. 'So why are they issuing a limited-edition commemorative wine set with "bishop-themed labels" to celebrate

SSPX priests can no longer conduct weddings or grant absolution

their own excommunications? Why are the new bishops flaunting coats of arms, some of which display a feeble grasp of heraldry?

'Above all, having kept quiet about Francis's flirtations with heresy just because he was nice to them, why have they chosen to lob a hand grenade into the Apostolic Palace just as Leo is trying to put an end to the factional nastiness encouraged by his predecessor?'

It's a good question. Although standing on a rock at Lampedusa was hardly a subtle piece of symbolism, it did remind the SSPX that, as supreme pontiff, Pope Leo can throw grenades back at them with infallible accuracy. He may, for example, decide to lift Francis's malicious restrictions on the celebration of the old Mass in the mainstream Church, thus removing a major incentive for traditionalist Catholics to attend Lefebvrist chapels. We shall see. He's hard to read, so it would be foolish to make predictions about the precise status of the old liturgy a year from now.

Even so, one thing seems clear. The leaders of the Society of St Pius X, having tried to make a virtue out of defying the Holy Father, are heading towards the fissiparous demi-monde of schismatic Catholic sects. This is not what their founder intended, it's not what many of their ordinary supporters want, and the inevitable cat-fight between factions will make them thoroughly miserable. But at least they can drown their sorrows by reaching for a bottle with a bishop-themed label.

Damian Thompson is the presenter of The Spectator*'s* Holy Smoke *podcast.*

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The Mancunian candidate

Andy Burnham doesn't understand his own philosophy

TALI FRASER

'Manchesterism,' Andy Burnham declared in his Makerfield by-election campaign video, 'is the end of neoliberalism.' The path to power, he believes, lies in the Mancunian Way. Not the ring road that sits atop Manchester's actual Downing Street, but his record as mayor of Britain's 'second city' – and the idea that it proves his philosophy of unlocking growth and productivity for the whole country. Yet the Mancunian Way is littered with potholes.

Manchesterism is not new. It did not begin with Burnham, nor with any Labour figure in Manchester. The name is borrowed – stolen, really – from the free-trade Manchester Liberalism of Richard Cobden and John Bright, who fought price-fixing, tariffs and protectionism in the 19th century. Disraeli sneered at what he called 'the Manchester School'. No matter, the school only grew; Margaret Thatcher was practically an alumna, steeped in its ideas.

Burnham's version is different, and comes with its own phrasebook –'good growth', 'business-friendly socialism', 'growth in every postcode'. That last one is too much for Graham Stringer, former leader of Manchester city council and now Labour MP for Blackley and Middleton South: 'Nonsense like "growth in every postcode" is just ridiculous. How could you ever achieve that? It's attractive until you think about it for two seconds.'

It's not only the name that's been lifted. What success Manchester has had, Burnham inherited. The city's turnaround did not begin with a socialist rejection of neoliberalism, as Stringer, council leader from 1984, can attest. 'We were elected on a very radical anti-Thatcher manifesto,' he recalls. Ten days into the job, he delivered a speech to the chamber of commerce – 'lead balloons would have floated high' by comparison – before a building executive took him to the 22nd-floor window and taught him a lesson. 'He said: "There's not a single tower crane. You'll be a success when you've got tower cranes out there." And I really took that to heart. More or less since that time Manchester has had tower cranes all over the skyline.'

When Labour lost the 1987 election, Stringer and the council courted the Tory government and the private sector, and built the only major British runway constructed since the second world war. The Metrolink was approved under Thatcher. 'We knew we were compromising with capitalism,' Stringer says. Burnham has taken the earlier, unworkable anti-Thatcher version – the one Stringer buried – and is rebranding it in black and yellow stripes to the country. As one source puts it: 'In so far as the city has outperformed other places, it's because the original Manchester figures did a bunch of things Burnham would not approve of and which the left moaned about endlessly.'

His clean-air zone swallowed a reported £104 million, before public backlash killed it

The other men credited with building modern Manchester are Sir Richard Leese, council leader from 1996 to 2021, the methodical doer, and Sir Howard Bernstein, chief executive from 1998 to 2017, the charming fixer. They put the private sector at the heart of the growth plan, made planning decisions quickly and stayed relaxed about height, density and that classic Labour sore spot: affordable housing targets. When the IRA bombed the city centre in 1996, Michael Heseltine found them £90 million to rebuild. On their watch came Britain's largest light-rail network, the Commonwealth Games and Etihad regeneration, Spinningfields business development, the £2.5 billion Oxford Road corridor connecting universities, and the BBC at MediaCityUK.

'The two knights', as one Manchester Labour figure calls them, also worked with Tory governments to build the devolution settlement from which Burnham emerged. Even the franchised buses – which do the heavy lifting in his Manchesterism story – came from a deal struck with George Osborne years before Burnham became mayor. The legal power was Conservative legislation; the money mostly came from outside the city. Burnham did get to choose the name and the colour.

Even then he wavered. He thought franchising would be 'too difficult' and 'worried about a fight' with bus owners. 'He had to be threatened by Richard and me,' Stringer says, 'because that was the basis of the deal with Osborne. Eventually Andy understood the pressure, and he dealt with it. But two years later than it should have been.'

Where Burnham acted alone, it went badly. His clean-air zone, charging polluting vehicles up to £60 a day, swallowed a reported £104 million, before public backlash killed it. 'An obviously terrible move,' one Labour source says.

Then there's the question of whose money built the skyline. UAE and China, prominent among the development backers, often build buy-to-let properties and not, notably, affordable housing – the rental earnings often flow overseas, including to accounts in Jersey.

But that is not the Manchesterism story Burnham wants you to know. And the story is what he's been good at. 'Dealing with the world and the media – he got it,' Stringer says. 'But his Manchesterism is quite confused.'

The growth figures he trumpets also wobble on inspection. A third of Greater Manchester's recent output growth comes from 'legal and accounting' – 45 per cent of all UK output growth in the sector. Trace it and you arrive in one statistical corner of Trafford: Altrincham, leafy footballer territory, where the ONS records 21,000 new such jobs between 2019 and 2023.

The area couldn't suddenly become home

to that many workers – and it likely didn't. Paystream My Max Ltd, an umbrella payroll firm based there, went from 5,226 employees in 2019 to 22,213 in 2023: contractors across the country who shut their limited companies after the IR35 changes. I spoke to two of them – they work in Canary Wharf. 'This idea of a Manchester productivity boom is actually based on financial services in London,' one source says. 'It's got nothing to do with Manchester.'

Strip out Trafford's phantom workforce and Greater Manchester's 2019-23 productivity growth slips from 14 per cent to 12. Adjust for suspect hours-worked figures – Mancunians apparently worked less in 2023 than in 2019, as jobs and output leapt – and it slides to 9 per cent. Ahead of the national 3 per cent, but rather less of a Burnham Manchesterism miracle.

A productivity boom should show up in pay packets. It hasn't. Real median wages

'This idea of a Manchester productivity boom is actually based on financial services in London'

in Greater Manchester are up just 1 per cent since 2019, mostly thanks to minimum-wage increases. The thinktank Centre for Cities ranks Manchester 12th for jobs growth over 2013 to 2023 – behind Luton, Mansfield, Peterborough and Basildon.

Look inward and the picture darkens. Since Burnham's election, GDP per head in the borough of Manchester has soared by 26.6 per cent, while Tameside, Bury, Oldham and Bolton have all underperformed the English average of 4.5 per cent. Wigan – home of his new constituency – managed 1.1 per cent, and employment rates have fallen there, and in Bury, Bolton and Stockport, even as the city centre's jumped nearly 12 points.

Which exposes the final irony. Burnham's national pitch is a war on trickle-down economics. Yet his allies defend Greater Manchester in precisely those terms. 'A lot of the growth comes from the city centre,' his campaign co-manager Louise Haigh has said. 'But then the proceeds of that are able to be distributed across Greater Manchester.'

Burnham has never really understood what the original Manchesterism was: free trade and peace through commerce. Nor has he grasped Labour's more recent version: compromise with capitalism, deals with Tories and cranes over ideology. What he offers is a name lifted from Cobden, a record built by Stringer, Bernstein and Leese, a bus network enabled by Osborne, a skyline funded by Abu Dhabi and Beijing, and growth figures that dissolve under a satellite photograph of Altrincham.

Manchester's Downing Street may be real. The legacy that has got Burnham to the one in London is not.

City boys

The people who really run Manchester

GUS CARTER

'It's basically a dictatorship,' one insider tells me. If you want to build anything in Britain's second city, you have to get permission from the so-called 'Manchester mafia'. These are the officials who have overseen the city's extraordinary redevelopment. The number of towers in Manchester has increased sevenfold since Andy Burnham became mayor in 2017.

You might assume that Burnham is the boss of this mafia family. But you'd be wrong. 'He just appears at the meetings and says, "Yes, yes, that's fine",' explains a source. 'His political involvement is minimal,' confirms Andrew Teacher, a real estate adviser who's worked in the city. 'The ship was motoring along well before he arrived.' The vast redevelopment had almost nothing to do with Burnham.

In fact, much of the foundation was laid by George Osborne. The coalition government worked with the true mob boss of Manchesterism, the late Sir Howard Bernstein, chief executive of the city council from 1998 to 2017.

Bernstein apparently used to insist that developers use Deloitte as their planning advisers. 'I run a property company, not a council,' he was once heard saying. Just days after leaving his job there, he took up a non-exec role in Deloitte's planning department.

Bernstein died in 2024 but his legacy, and his consiglieres, still exert control. His son was involved in the purchase of what will become 'No. 10 North', currently a derelict retail park on the edge of the city centre. The council paid £100,000 for his advice.

'In the Bernstein era, Bernstein himself, Richard Leese and Dave Roscoe were essentially the people who pulled the strings,' says a source close to the council. Roscoe is still calling the shots from the planning department, which he has run alongside his wife Julie since the 1970s.

During the pandemic, Roscoe did a charity workout for the NHS from his living room. Among the £20 and £30 donations from friends was another payment: £50,000 from Salboy Limited, a Manchester developer owned by Betfred founder Fred Done. Those who know Roscoe say he has quite a reputation. 'He's a hardass,' says one. A city developer told me Roscoe has a habit of putting his feet on his desk during meetings.

A few years ago, the planning officer appeared on a panel about development in the city. A man in the audience put his hand up and said: 'There's this perception that you're only allowed to use certain architects or certain planning consultants when you work in Manchester. What do you think of that?'

Roscoe replied: 'Who asked that question? What was your name?'

My insider thought: 'You're never going to get work in Manchester again.'

Look at the list of developers in the city and you'll see the same five names again and again: Renaker, Property Alliance Group, Salboy, Relentless, Select Property Group. Renaker was the main beneficiary of the £300 million loan pot provided by the coalition government, a relationship that has come under scrutiny.

Earlier this summer, a rival developer, Weis Group, took the council to court, arguing that Renaker had been given preferential interest rates. The case was thrown out, but the sense of chumminess remains. The Greater Manchester pension fund, which contains civil servants' pensions, has invested tens of millions of pounds in Renaker.

'It's referred to as the Manchester mafia for a reason, but I don't think that in itself is dodgy,' explains Teacher. 'It's just the nature of how the business world works. People want to do business with people they know and trust.'

So what can we learn about Manchesterism from the way the city is built? Burnham seems perfectly happy letting the civil servants run the show, as long as he gets to take the credit at the end. I ask a developer what happens to those who don't want to live under the diktat of civil servants. 'If you're not in the little special gang, they will hound you out of town.'

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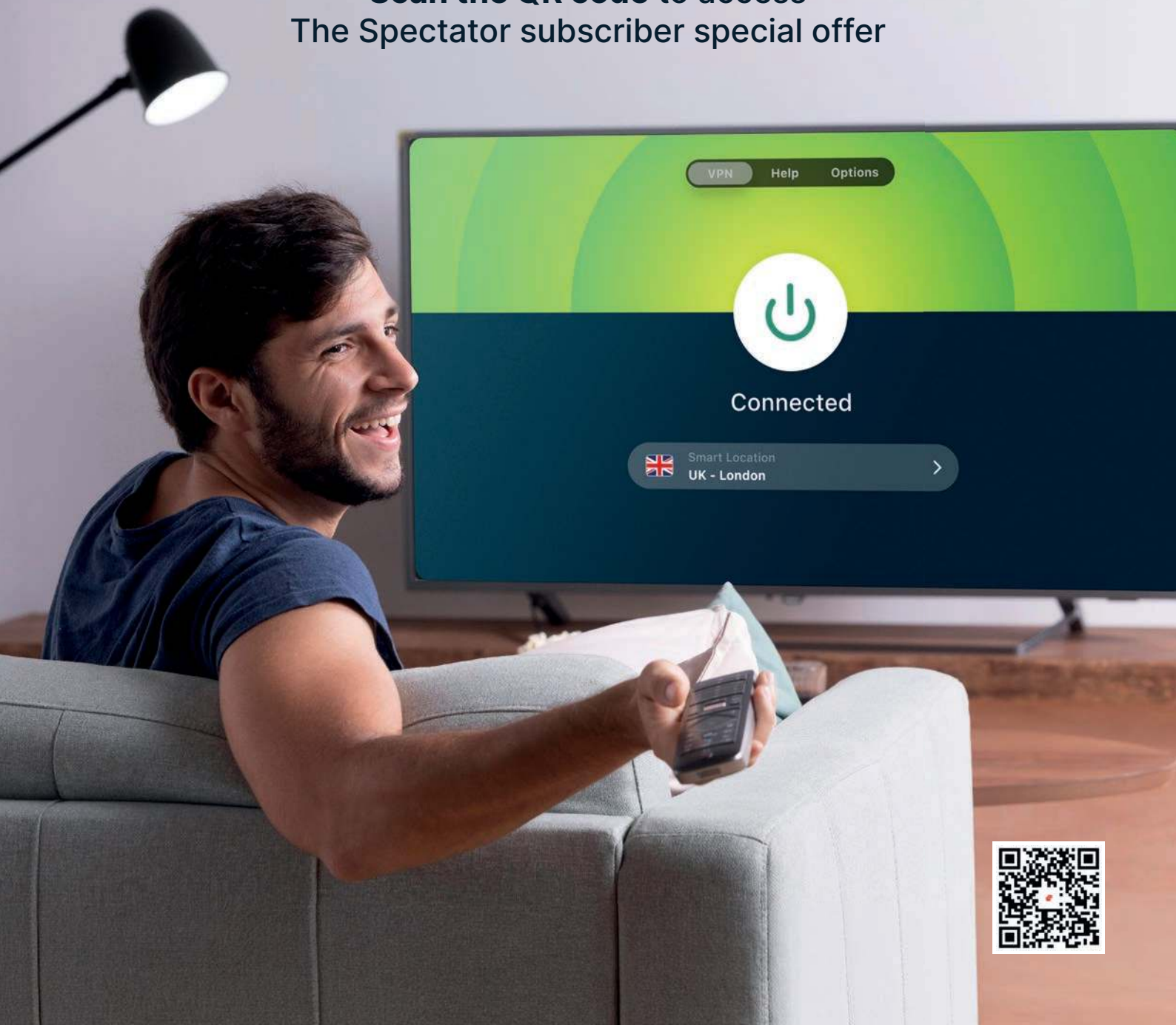
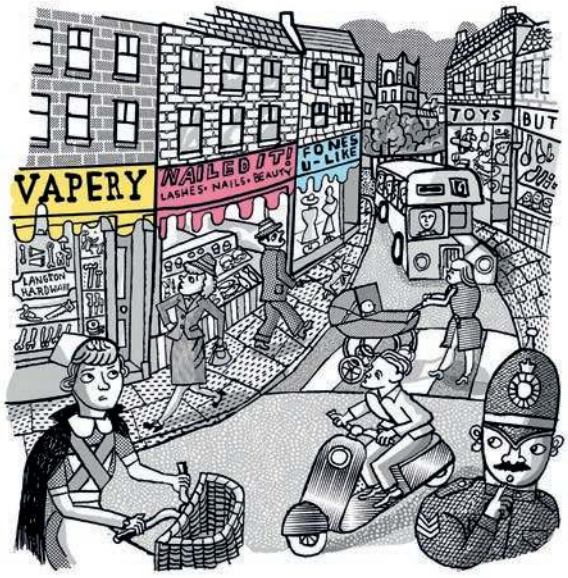


Window dressing

Gen Z's surprising nostalgia for the old high street

MAX JEFFERY



Dave and Lynne are remembering the good old days when kids had their baths in galvanised tubs in front of the fire. 'No inhibition,' says Dave. 'Straight with your clothes off. Straight in there. Mum'll throw a bucket of water over you. Wash yourself. Another bucket of water.'

Dave manages the E. Langston hardware shop, but it isn't a real business. Not anymore. Some years ago, its premises were transposed from Piper's Row in Wolverhampton to the Black Country Living Museum. Its life is happier here. There's not much left on Piper's Row today: an off licence, a bus stop, a cheap hotel.

The Black Country Living Museum was founded in 1978 to teach people about life during the Industrial Revolution. When homes or businesses of that period face obsolescence, the museum resurrects them on its fake high streets. The place looks like a working town – just one that's locked in time and free from concerns about crime, profit and rent. E. Langston's interior and façade are set in 1930, the museum's chapel is set in 1837, its functioning bakery is set in 1900 and its working man's inn – which sells alcohol to visitors (sawdust on the floor, no lager) – is set in 1915. There's also a tailor, a library, a school and a chippie which fries in dripping.

The museum is set on a big plot on the outskirts of Dudley, a short train ride from Birmingham. No region in Britain has seen its morphology change as dramatically since the industrial age as the Black Country. In 1869, the US consul to Birmingham, Elihu Burritt, wrote about climbing Dudley Castle, a couple of hundred yards from the site of the museum today, and seeing a warzone of furnaces: 'It was the sublimest battle scene ever enacted on Earth; that ten thousand Titans were essaying to breach heaven with a thousand mortars, each charged with a small red-hot hill.' The Black Country's last working blast furnace – named Elisabeth, at the Bilston Steelworks – closed in 1979. It was blown up with gelignite a year later, its remains sold for scrap.

Today, people come to the Black Country Museum less to educate themselves about history and more to see what a proper town used to look like. 'Where I'm from in Oldbury there was the most beautiful bank,' says Dave from behind his counter at the hardware shop. 'I think it was a Lloyds Bank years ago. It's a vape shop now.' Lynne, a museum visitor, agrees: 'We used to have a hardware shop like this that were on our estate for donkey's years and now it's gone. Guess what it is now? Vape shop.' It is surreal that the most idyllic high street in the area is a reconstruction.

The place looks like a working town – just one that's free from concerns about crime, profit and rent

The museum has clearly noticed the strong market for British nostalgia and has changed focus accordingly. It no longer only chronicles the peak years of collieries and steelworks, but more recent history too. Homes and shops from the 1960s have been moved onto the site. Next to a cast-iron house set in 1960, taken from the nearby Brewery Fields estate – for a while, in a desperate search to save money, Dudley Council tried using cheap iron panels instead of bricks to build homes – are Kathleen and her grandson Reuben. Kathleen brings Reuben to the museum once a year so he can see how she grew up in Cradley Heath, about four miles away. Kathleen's father, David, was a miner at the Sandwell Park and Jubilee collieries.

Nostalgia is normally confined to the old. Today, however, many young people don't want to live in our modern era. Last year, an Ipsos poll showed that only by a margin of 4 per cent would Gen Z rather be born today than in 1975, a year they never saw. A study from 2022 showed that the shape of Britain's nostalgia is changing. Once, it was about a desire to revert to a more traditional time. These days, it's rooted in a fear of the future: of economic deprivation, of technology.

Lynne says that to some extent we are all responsible for the state of our towns and villages. Blame councils and the government all you like, but our high streets have suffered because we're addicted to convenience. Lynne says she buys her clothes from the Chinese online marketplace Temu. 'Most of what I've got on is Temu,' she says. '*Everything* from Temu.' She tells me she's from Sheffield, from a family of cutlery makers. 'I always went to work with my mum or my dad when I was little. I used to love it. My dad did big trays for Saudi Arabians. They were huge. They used to buy big trays and serve cooked baby camels on them. I used to polish the trays up.'

By the fake post office, set in 1965, a giggling man is telling his children to pose for a photo. They have their arms around a painted fibreglass girl, who has around her neck a collection box for the Spastics Society from the 1950s. 'HELP THE SPASTIC, THANK YOU!!' the box reads. There is an information card informing visitors that 'in the years following the charity's creation, the word "spastic" was used as a cruel insult'. In the museum's library, too, there are notices in books informing readers they 'may include negative depictions of other people' which were 'wrong then and are wrong now'. Even here, the past can't rest in peace.

ROYAL NOTEBOOK

Robert Hardman

SEE YOU SOON!

Has grace-and-favour accommodation now fallen from grace – and favour, too? In recent days, we have learned that both our head of state and our (likely) head of government are giving up the free homes that come with the job. The King has said he will not live at Buckingham Palace once major refurbishment works are completed next year. His heir has let it be known that he won't live there either. The monarch is very happy living at Clarence House, just as his mother was when she became Queen in 1952. Back then, Winston Churchill formally advised the Sovereign that she had to move into the Palace. No modern prime minister would dream of telling the Sovereign where to sleep, least of all one who plans to follow his example. Andy Burnham has said that he will not live at No. 10 (or 11) Downing Street. What's good enough for the King is good enough for the 'King of the North'. So, Burnham will keep a few clean T-shirts in London but the family home will remain his Victorian semi outside Wigan, just down the road from his new office at 'No. 10 North'. The entire public sector will rejoice at this ringing endorsement of its cherished 'working from home' orthodoxy.

We are supposed to regard these housing decisions as practical and relatable. That may be true. But a residence with no resident has no persona and no soul. It becomes an office or a museum. Both the Palace and No. 10 will be diminished.

We have one royal who says he *does* want to stay at the Palace. Prince Harry originally declined the offer of a room there during this week's visit to the UK, citing security issues. Then he changed his mind at the weekend, only to find that the Palace offer had expired. An aide spoke of Harry's 'disappointment'. We can only imagine his dismay the very next day as the High Court rejected his case against the *Daily Mail* on every single count (leaving a £50 million bill on the table). What a trip it's turning out to be. At this rate, he'll lose his luggage on the way home. Harry, let us remember, is also the first royal to enter the travel industry, having co-founded an eco-friendly agency called Travalyst. After this tour, I'm not sure it would be my first choice when booking a holiday.

The King will continue to use his country residences. But what about Burnham? If he dislikes Downing Street, he'll hardly want to spend his weekends at a Tudor pile in the Chilterns, some 200 miles from his usual Saturday haunt of Everton FC. On the other hand, all PMs (and their families) come to love Chequers once they have experienced its oak-panelled quirkiness, its indoor pool and the unobtrusive staff. The Starmers have become deeply attached to the place. Even staunch lefties can admire the extensive collection of Cromwelliana. When David Lloyd George resigned in 1922, the instant response of his daughter Megan was: 'Damn, there goes Chequers.'

Committed to defending all faiths, the King now prepares to appoint his first Catholic prime minister. He has previously appointed a professed atheist and a Hindu, while also inheriting a 'non-practising Christian' (Liz Truss) from his mother. The Supreme Governor of the Church of England has yet to appoint one of his own.

The photograph of the Queen welcoming J.K. Rowling to Holyroodhouse this week is, as a close friend tells me, 'pure Camilla'. It was ostensibly to celebrate a shared love of literacy. The Queen supports more book charities than anyone in royal history and Rowling is the Taylor Swift of print. Both women are also energetically involved in campaigning for the victims of sexual violence. The Court Circular was a masterclass in understatement: 'Her Majesty this afternoon received Ms Joanne Rowling (Author).' Read into it what you like (and the Queen knows that you will) but this is the polar opposite of cancellation. It reminds me of Queen Camilla's speech at her literary reception in 2023. That same week, it had been revealed that Roald Dahl's publishers were due to censor hurty words like 'fat' and 'ugly' from his books. 'Please remain true to your calling,' she urged us writers, 'unimpeded by those who may wish to curb the freedom of your expression.' Cue roars of 'Hear! Hear!' The Queen paused, gave a knowing smile and added simply: 'Enough said.' She did not even mention Dahl by name. The very next day, Penguin backed down. Pure Camilla indeed.

Another striking royal image is that of tennis fans queuing for this year's Wimbledon championships only to find the Princess of Wales, patron of the All England Club, on duty in the box office. This year marks the centenary of another Wimbledon first – the only royal appearance on court. In 1926, the Duke of York (the future King George VI) and his former equerry Louis Greig entered the men's doubles, having previously been RAF champions. As Greig's grandson Geordie Greig writes in *The King Maker*, Wimbledon allocated this royal debut to centre court until the Duke asked for a less prominent slot. So Bertie and Louis were moved to court two. Not that it helped much. The Duke was off-form from the start and grew worse as the crowd shouted useless tips like 'Try the other hand, Sir!' The pair lost in straight sets. Little wonder the Palace has been keener to focus on another 1926 landmark: the birth of Queen Elizabeth II.

Robert Hardman is the author of Elizabeth II: In Private. In Public. The Inside Story. *He writes for the* Daily Mail.

MATTHEW PARRIS

War is coming to our doorstep

A stray thought of my own while watching Iranian drones tracing fiery paths over the Gulf, a stray quote from Ukraine and the background rumble of uncertainty about Britain's Defence Investment Plan, have set my mind racing. My conclusion is at the same time obvious yet unnerving.

As a European power, we have been watching the Ukraine war from almost the front row, but it has seemed a world away. Nightly on television we've seen Russian and Ukrainian attack drones streaking through the sky, half-reminiscent of a grisly firework display. From our armchairs we've read about how this conflict is turning into a competition between drone capabilities.

Putin's huge reserve of human meat for the infantry grinder massively outweighs Kyiv's reserves of manpower; but Ukraine's rapid development of drone technology has more than matched Russia's – even tipping the scales in Zelensky's favour. Or so, from our armchairs, we learn.

We've been spectators too in another war: that between Israel and the United States on one side and Iran on the other – with Gulf states caught literally in the crossfire. This has been a war entirely without infantry: not a single boot on the ground, just a few missiles and lots of drones – even sea-going drone-boats now.

And we watch, unthreatened. Of course wars that we're not ourselves involved in have always served as spectator sports for those drawn to this kind of thing; but the arrival of drone warfare appears to offer yet another pane of bulletproof glass between spectator and spectacle. Not only are our own soldiers not in this fight, but the warring nations' armies too (in the Middle East if not Ukraine) stay confined to base. Even the adversaries can watch the conflict as audience rather than participants. In a ghastly way, the arrival of drones as a principal weapon of aggression threatens to turn the whole thing into something like a video game for all concerned.

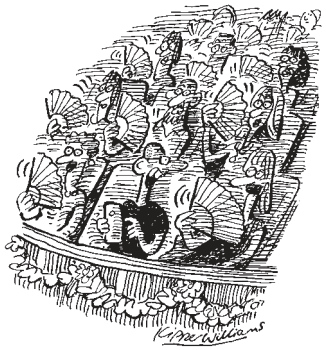
This is already having consequences for defence planning. We're told Britain's procurement needs must now be rebalanced away from new naval destroyers and in favour of drones and vessels to carry them. We're told that though our own standing army is now so pitifully small it could fit in Wembley stadium, this may simply reflect the modern reality that sheer numbers of soldiers may not be what decides the outcome.

Earlier in the Ukrainian war, we read about the trenches and wondered if the Somme would prove the model for the conflict. It has begun to look as if the Battle of Britain is the better model – but without pilots.

Especially for an island nation like ours, watching a war in which we are participating, but with no immediate expectation of its arrival in our midst, is hardly new. So a first response is to ask what's not to like about war as a video game: far fewer soldiers, sailors or airmen die in video wars that, God willing, will never repeat the first world war horror of mass slaughter.

The new warfare will be much more like terrorist insurrection – except the terrorists will be hostile states

But a moment's reflection brings a shudder. I experienced that shudder when reading a report by my *Times* colleague Maxim Tucker in Ukraine. Max had been talking with a crack team of Ukrainian drone-launchers. He quotes one of them, codenamed 'Panama': 'The technology we have today means that war is no longer simply something where you can enter someone else's territory and keep it at arm's length. It will return to your own home. And when you smell war burning on your doorstep, you perceive it in a completely different way than when you are just looking at a picture on your television.'



'Please stop waving that fan – it's very distracting when I'm trying to text.'

'Your own home'. That's the shudder. Drone and missile technology mean that you and I and everyone we know may be recruited, without our say-so, as participants in wars Britain may fight. We will no longer be able to watch from afar as our armies perform. The new warfare will be much more like the terrorist insurrection we faced from the IRA – except the terrorists will be hostile states detonating their explosions remotely.

Israeli and Lebanese residents on their respective sides of their border already know this. Londoners and the people of Coventry experienced something like it, as did those in Dresden, when the bombs rained down. So you'd be right to remark that there's nothing new in targeted or untargeted destruction whose principal victims are civilians.

Where you'd be wrong, though, is if you supposed that past civilian-targeted bombing campaigns were anything but a *preparation* for invasion. In the second world war it was, from the start, always the case that in the end we would physically invade and occupy them, or they would invade and occupy us.

Invasion is no longer the prospect, and Russia's low-level hostilities with pipeline-cutting and cyber-aggression give us a foretaste of what we're in for – just as Russians are experiencing the 'smell of war burning on their own doorsteps' at the hands of Ukraine and its drone technology.

Nobody is planning to invade or occupy our country, and, in my lifetime at least, nobody looks likely to. That is the good news. The bad news is that conflicts which may involve us will be at a lower level – somewhere between threat and nuisance – but persistent and long-running. Operating at arm's length and using remotely activated technology of which the drone is only the most striking example, our enemies will possess the capability (which we too will possess) to be a bloody nuisance: hornets we can swat but whose nests we cannot remove.

Hostilities we observe remotely from our armchairs are by the same token fires we may smell on our own doorsteps, observed remotely from the armchairs of enemies. It works both ways. 'Remote' is a double-edged sword.

DOUGLAS MURRAY

It's the rules versus the people

In January this year Dominic Cummings – once of this parish – warned *The Spectator*'s editor and assistant editor that Whitehall and the establishment parties would 'stop at nothing' to prevent Nigel Farage from becoming prime minister. As Cummings told the *Quite right!* podcast and as we summarise on p13: 'The people around [Keir] Starmer and all through the upper echelons of the Whitehall system are looking at Donald Trump. They're looking across Europe, and they're saying to themselves: "The lesson is to strike early and strike hard and not let these people in… Let's smash the absolute living shit out of Farage, and make sure that he doesn't win, by fair means or foul."'

Cummings may be right about that, but the two most obvious comparisons with the recent hosing of Farage demonstrate how this manoeuvre can just as easily backfire.

The 'anti-Trump playbook' – as Trump himself has referred to the treatment of Farage – quite obviously did not work with Trump. Nevertheless, there was a period in around 2023 when it looked as if it could do so. Mar-a-Lago had already been raided by the FBI, looking for classified documents that it turned out almost every former official had lying around. And it was the year in which Trump was dragged to court in New York to face 34 felony counts relating to alleged hush-money payments and the falsifying of business records. Then in January 2024 a civil court ordered Trump to pay almost $90 million to a woman who had accused him of assaulting her in the changing rooms of a Manhattan department store three decades earlier.

To many observers it seemed that if only one of these cases had been pursued then the people most eager to keep Trump out of running in the 2024 election might have got their way. But the 'get-Trump' movement overegged it. So relentless were the accusations against him – and so patently absurd in some cases – that all but the most Trump-obsessed voters zoned out. Trump's opponents threw everything they had at him in the hope that something would stick, only to discover that they had thrown so much at him that nothing stuck. Certainly not in the minds of the voting public who returned him to office the following year in both houses and the popular vote. The other example of something similar is happening in France where the leader of the National Rally, Marine Le Pen, just had her conviction for embezzlement upheld by a Paris court. The accusation against Le Pen was that her party had used millions of euros of EU funds to pay aides who used their time working in French national politics instead of European parliamentary matters. A thing that no other party in the EU parliament has ever done, obviously.

The French courts originally sentenced Le Pen to a four-year prison term and a five-year ban on running for political office. But in France – as in America – the case seems not to have landed with the public. The whole process looks too much like a concerted attempt to stop at nothing in order to prevent Le Pen from being able to run in France's 2027 presidential election. Despite an appeals court upholding the conviction this week, it now looks as if Le Pen will be allowed to run in the next election, though for a year she will have to do so wearing an ankle monitor.

Farage is, like Trump, too different from other politicians to be brought down by the usual rules

Which brings us back to Farage. In recent weeks the Reform party leader has looked vulnerable over his acceptance of a £5 million gift from a Thai-based crypto billionaire called Christopher Harborne. Now he is also getting criticism for accepting gifts from a roguish character in his inner circle known as 'Posh George' (aka George Cottrell). Farage has responded to this with the uncommon move of resigning his parliamentary seat and vowing to run in a by-election in Clacton in which he promises to give the voters the say on whether or not they think these allegations should matter.

'I don't understand why he's so popular…'

It doesn't seem the wisest of moves to me. Voters tend not to like endlessly having to return to the polls. And the only precedent I can think of for Farage's move was that odd moment in 2008 when David Davis stepped down and then stood in a fresh by-election over the issue of how long terrorist suspects could be detained without charge. My memory of that affair was that nobody could quite work out why Davis needed to resign and then fight and win a by-election in the same seat over an issue which he failed to bring any particularly fresh attention to. If he thought the stunt would advance his standing in the Conservative party, then the years since speak for themselves: to date David Davis is just about the only MP of his generation not to lead the Conservative party.

Farage is a different case. Anyone who thinks he might be intimidated into stepping down should remember that this is a man who led the UK Independence party in 2009. A party which, in the wake of the Westminster MPs expenses scandal, saw nothing odd about campaigning in the subsequent elections by knocking on prospective voters' doors while wearing great big pound signs.

Personally I am not sure that any of the charges being made against Farage are going to stick. He is, like Trump, too different from other politicians to be brought down by the usual rules. It is true that he has needed personal security for many years, and it is obvious that the ways in which these and other expenses will have been paid for may be unorthodox. But the whole point of Farage is to be unorthodox. And, as with Trump, statements or scandals that would bring down any other politician fail to bring him down.

Nevertheless, it's a fine balance. And a reminder of how much hangs on the often marginal judgment calls that people make. The people who are out to get Farage are presumably hoping to break him. If events across the Atlantic are anything to go by, they could just as easily be the making of him.

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SPECTATOR CLUB

What's the point of Eton?

The school's new head will face an overflowing in-tray

CHARLIE METHVEN

If the Battle of Waterloo was won on Eton's playing fields – as Wellington allegedly said – might Xi Jinping's 21st-century ambitions for China end up being pushed there too?

A picture of the list of next year's King's Scholars, currently doing the rounds of Old Etonians, shows that of 14 places awarded for September 2026, ten are going to pupils with Chinese names. 'Yet another nail in the coffin,' grumbled the OE who sent me the picture the other day. The scholarships were established by Henry VI for 'poor, scholarly boys' in his kingdom. These days, with the upper-middle-class English increasingly priced out of paying the £65,000-a-year fees, they are more sought after than ever – and bitterly resented when they go elsewhere.

The make-up of the KS list is just the latest news to have gone down badly with alumni continually being hit up for donations. It has all added to the general angst that's surrounded the 12-year tenure of outgoing head Simon Henderson. 'Trendy Hendy' – as he was nicknamed for his attempts to modernise the school – is being replaced in September 2027 by Alastair Chirnside, currently warden (head) of St Edward's, Oxford – aka Teddy's.

I know both men. Chirnside, a brilliant classicist, was a contemporary of mine at Eton and Oxford. Henderson, a pupil at Winchester in the same era, was an amiable opponent on the football pitch who I've bumped into occasionally since.

You could barely imagine two more different personalities. Henderson is convivial, sociable and modern to a fault – proudly appointing a director of inclusion education and a female deputy in his early years as 'head man', colloquial Eton speak for the official (and strictly two-word) 'head master'. Chirnside is a more austere, academic figure whose opening gambit when he arrived at Teddy's was to reinstate landlines and ban pupils from using mobile phones.

What does the change mean for the world's most famous, and sometimes infamous, school, where Prince George will be arriving in September?

According to some sources, this is the first powerplay by Sir Nicholas Coleridge, the former Condé Nast publishing boss, who replaced Lord Waldegrave as provost of Eton a couple of years ago (provost being the chairman of the school's governing body). 'Nick inherited Trendy Hendy, who had been very much William Waldegrave's man,' one source tells me. 'Nick is much more sensitive to old-boy opinion than Waldegrave, who was very supportive of all the woke stuff. Raising money from pissed-off alumni isn't easy and Nick is nothing if not commercial, whereas Waldegrave was sniffy about the views of other Old Etonians. I think in general there's a view that Eton has lost a bit of its soul and that we could do with a period of rediscovering what the point of the school is. It's not much good bleating to the government about being a charity while filling the place up with massively rich foreigners.'

It has been claimed that only about 15 per cent of Eton's student body are foreign. The true figure, when accounting for boys whose foreign-born parents are living in Britain (often working in financial services), is understood to be rather higher – possibly as much as a third.

'It's not much good bleating about being a charity while filling the place up with massively rich foreigners'

Henderson's departure at the age of 51 was certainly not widely predicted. After some turbulent times in his early years, when he seemed to be endlessly in the media for perceived 'wokery', things had recently calmed down. It's only fair to point to the achievements of his time in the hot seat, not least multiple partnerships with state schools and bursaries to help less wealthy parents meet the ever-escalating fees. Nor is it an easy job – no matter what Eton heads do, they will end up irritating at least some of the people some of the time. And while other schools appear in the media only during the most intense of scandals, at Eton even minor occurrences can end up as double-page splashes in the *Daily Mail*.

However, it was hard to escape the feeling that, as a Wykehamist himself, Henderson never quite 'got' Eton. Where Winchester (alma mater of Rishi Sunak) has always been primarily an academic school, Eton had traditionally catered for a broad mix of academic ability, from the mega-brained King's Scholars to others who might go on to make their mark in the army, Hollywood, sports or the entrepreneurial world.

One 'beak' (as Eton's teachers are known) tells me: 'While there has always been an element of moving with the times, generally Eton would sit towards the back of that advance. Under Henderson, it has sometimes seemed as though there was a pointed effort to shock the sensibilities of teachers and OEs by trying to put us at the forefront of progressive education. I think that has been mistaken.'

Such complaints are unlikely under Chirnside, who is at heart a traditionalist, even if more malleable than his outward image might suggest. As a former master at Eton himself, he has deep-rooted friendships in the school's notoriously tricky masters' common room. He's also a fierce achiever: apart from his impressive academic record (a double first in greats and modern languages from Merton College, Oxford), he also starved himself down to ten stone to qualify for a half-blue as a lightweight rower.

Chirnside's in-tray will doubtless be overflowing when he takes up the post just over a year from now. He will face familiar headmasterly issues – recruitment of top teachers, demands for new facilities – as well as more topical ones, such as the government's crusade against private schooling. More importantly, though, may he be gently starting the process of answering the more existential question: what is the point of Eton? Is it principally to educate the best of British? Or to be a melting pot for the world's richest to send their highly tutored children to enjoy the benefits of an institution built up over centuries?

If Chirnside stays the course – his great predecessor Sir Eric Anderson completed 14 years, from 1980 until Alastair's final term in summer 1994 – he'll still be there on Eton's 600th anniversary in 2040. For the school to really remain part of our national discourse, that fundamental question is going to have to be answered.

Unjust William

Sir: It is a bad idea for schools to be recommending their pupils listen to William Dalrymple's podcast *Empire* ('Striking back', 4 July), without also suggesting they listen to, for example, Niall Ferguson on the same subject. Dalrymple does not prize the British Empire, but many of us who have studied it in detail admire the many benefits it conferred on its subjects. Balance is essential in educating children and from Dalrymple they will get an unduly pejorative view. Hearing his analysis, one might wonder how such an inefficient and corrupt entity succeeded in governing about a third of the world for a long period.

There were two main failures. The first was the empire's inability after the second world war to afford the cost of its African colonies long enough to ensure the development of a significant local middle class before independence. The second was the withdrawal from India in 1947, which was both too early and not properly thought through, resulting in partition and shocking intercommunal violence. What was needed in both cases was more empire, not less. All governmental systems have their weaknesses, but, by and large, the British Empire was a force for good.

Gregory Shenkman
London SW7

Norwegian good

Sir: Your article 'Dark Green money' (4 July) mentions the argument that decarbonisation will prevent the UK from being held 'hostage' by autocratic regimes. With Norway accounting for about 70 per cent of our gas imports and about a third of our oil imports, I think not. China, on the other hand, manufactures around 80 per cent of the world's solar panels, with the UK importing about 65 per cent of these – a fascinating inversion of an oft-cited argument for net zero.

Trevor Pitman
Beckenham, Kent

Foreign objects

Sir: Lionel Shriver is surely right that some commentators are more invested in Donald Trump's embarrassment than in US success ('My own Epic Fury', 4 July). But one need not share their priorities to question whether 'utter devastation' was ever the only measure of such success. It's possible to detest the Iranian regime, wish America well and still believe that foreign policy is ultimately judged by outcomes rather than by the scale of its ambitions. Not every imperfect settlement is a humiliation, nor every compromise a capitulation. Shriver's column is characteristically forceful. But in foreign affairs, the most satisfying conclusion is not always the most prudent.

Federico Forni
London SW15

Liner notes

Sir: Peter Bradshaw in his review of *Lido Land* (Books, 27 June) compares lidos to ocean liners. The now demolished Kenwood swimming pool in a Leicester suburb had a white art-deco snack bar facing the water. Here we bought our Bovril and KitKats over a large mahogany counter. A little brass plate informed us that this was from the purser's office on the liner *RMS Mauretania*, scrapped in 1935.

Peter Ashley
Slawston, Leicestershire

A load of balls

Sir: Tali Fraser's cautionary words on 'cheap, knock-off squishies' (Notes on…, 4 July) hit close to home for me. One thing I won't miss about teaching when I leave this year is the endless gimmicks teachers are encouraged to embrace to meet the growing demand of dyslexia, ADHD and autism profiles. With Send diagnoses through the roof, I'm increasingly sceptical about the integrity of assessment clinics that stand to gain from a rise in customers. But who knew the stress-ball industry would be an indirect beneficiary of this farce?

Sam Finniear
Guildford, Surrey

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Pimm's numbers

Sir: Bruce Anderson wonders why Pimm's has never been marketed properly in the USA (Drink, 27 June). Properly or not, it was and remains a staple at polo matches and sailing events. From my time there in the 1980s, I have eight white plastic tumblers showing the Pimm's logo and pictures of a mounted polo player and a yacht. Also shown is 'Alc. 33.5 % by Vol'. Those were the days – now it's down to 25 per cent (worldwide).

Malcolm Watson
Ryde, Isle of Wight

Marriage of convenience

Sir: Following Charlie Baker's excellent article about smaller weddings ('Marry in haste', 4 July), I recommend a clandestine trip to Gretna. These days you have to book in advance, and at Gretna registry office, the 'legal' part is a normal civil ceremony. But we then went to the old blacksmith's shop at nearby Gretna Green for the original anvil ceremony, officiated by two very Scottish gentlemen who were true professionals and for whom this was the only real ceremony.

By not having a 'normal' wedding we could also afford to charter a yacht in the British Virgin Islands. I rest my case.

Alastair Wray
Herefordshire

Shorts story

Sir: I do not usually find much to disagree with in Rory Sutherland's excellent articles, but I confess I am not with him on the subject of gentlemen's shorts (The Wiki Man, 4 July). In this town there is now a surfeit of men displaying semi-trousered limbs of varying aesthetic coupled with strange hosiery and sandals. Has Labour's imperative for a Summer of Sex been exchanged for a Summer of Sox?

John Bennett
Southwold, Suffolk

We have a consignment of Gentleman's Relish, a pot of which will be sent to the writer of the best letter each week. This week's winner is Gregory Shenkman.

Tales of woe from our demoralised economy

A quartet of news stories all point in the same troubling direction. First, easyJet is about to become the latest notable name to leave the London Stock Exchange, following last month's takeover of Tate & Lyle by a US buyer. The FTSE 250-listed low-cost airline is keen to accept a £5.5 billion offer from Castlelake, a private equity firm that's also – you've guessed it – from the US.

Inherent volatility in the aviation business combined with the presence of founder Stelios Haji-Ioannou as a minority shareholder has made easyJet a turbulent long-haul flight for investors. The shares have rocketed since Castlelake came into the picture, so cashing out looks rational – but the predation of our public market by foreign bargain-hunters goes on and on.

Then there's a report of institutional investors in housebuilder Barratt Redrow demanding share buybacks, designed to reinflate a share price that has halved since 2023 and to return cash to shareholders that might otherwise be deployed to acquire land for Barratt developments. This column tends to frown at the buyback mechanism, because arguably it signifies a business that has lost the courage to invest in its own future; it also indicates fear of cut-price takeover bids. But Barratt is Britain's biggest housebuilder at a time when an urgent national need for new homes is high on the political agenda. The investors' threat of a 'boardroom coup' if they don't get their money back tells us something is seriously amiss.

Likewise, though less obviously, the £750 million Barclays has committed to buy a 999-year lease on its Canary Wharf HQ is capital that won't be directed towards lending to businesses, despite the relaxation of Bank of England restrictions as a last gasp of Rachel Reeves's forlorn push for growth.

And finally, a British Chambers of Commerce survey tells us that only 17 per cent of UK companies plan to increase investment in plant, machinery and equipment in the coming quarter; 26 per cent say they will actually reduce capital investment. The driving forces of capitalism, large and small, are pragmatic self-interest, ingenuity and optimism. Companies do whatever they have to do to survive and prosper. But in their different ways, all these stories sound dire warnings: of a demoralised UK economy held back by dysfunctional capital markets.

Trump's steaming pile

Very little of my life's work is likely to survive on YouTube, but I'll always be proud of a clip from a *Spectator* event some years ago in which I described the 'anarcho-libertarian' creed espoused by cryptocurrency advocates as 'a pile of horseshit'. I continue to regard their dismissal of central banks and 'fiat' currencies as a shallow excuse for being hypnotised by the fast-moving bitcoin price, with no more intellectual underpinning than a Las Vegas slot-machine.

But crypto itself is not inherently evil; it's a smart use of digital mechanics. What's repulsive are the people who make fortunes from it at the expense of the gullible. Never mind those chancers in the spotlight around Nigel Farage; consider the case of Donald Trump, who once said crypto was 'based on thin air' but whose latest disclosure offers the precise figure of $1,430,390,415 (just over £1 billion) in crypto earnings while in office last year. That includes $635 million from the venture behind the Trump 'meme coin' whose price has plunged at punters' expense. A lasting symbol of this president's shameless corrosion of democracy will be his steaming pile of crypto winnings.

Air con

At the height of the recent French heatwave (there's another cooking) we were 11 for lunch. The dining room was shuttered to keep it relatively cool. But as the heat rose with the bodies and the debate, a resourceful American guest found the nearest thing in the house to an air conditioning unit – an avant-garde fan with a water-vapour feature and a twinkling digital panel – and seated it on the 12th chair. 'It's our AI robot,' I explained to my puzzled French neighbour. 'If anyone mentions Brexit, Trump or the World Cup, it flashes red and breathes smoke. Look!'

Aircon and 'air cooling' are in every sense this summer's hot consumer issue. A domestic air conditioner used to be an £800 fridge-sized box with an exhaust hose; suddenly, we're bombarded with ads for bargain-priced mini-coolers barely bigger than toasters. But as the *Guardian* points out (alongside an ad for 'Cooling Ace' devices embedded in the online piece), some of these offers are scams, using fake Aldi websites. And one of the first to pop up on Amazon, a '6-in-1 portable air conditioner… with ice pack' for £119.99, is reviewed as 'weak, noisy, unreliable' and 'just an expensive fan'.

For true Brits, aircon in the home is as foreign as a bidet. But there's an opportunity for innovators to come up with an efficient, low-energy, sub-£100 room-cooler that might sit quietly on, say, the bookshelves of an old vicarage. If it could be disguised as bound volumes of *Spectator* back-numbers, I'm sure we'd lend our name to it.

Party politics

Two highlights of last week's *Spectator* party. The supermodel-tall ex-New York fashion journalist Plum Sykes told me she loved my outfit. And Lance Forman, purveyor of the 'London cure' smoked salmon that was one of the evening's treats, delivered an off-the-cuff expression of entrepreneurial spirit I wish I'd been able to record. The gist was that whatever fate and government throw at you – in his case including salmon diseases and compulsory purchase of his Stratford smokery to make way for the London Olympics, as well as Labour's NIC hike and other current cost factors – all you can ever do is battle on and strive to be better than your competitors. Note to Andy Burnham: whatever your plans, they'll only ever be funded by tax revenues from a resilient private sector, so for heaven's sake don't make business conditions even worse.

BOOKS

Beautiful, bedevilled island

Ian Thomson foresees communist Cuba reborn as a capitalist playground

Mrs Gargantua: Reports from Cuba
by J.S. Tennant
William Collins, £25, pp. 352

Keeper of My Kin: Memoir of an Immigrant Daughter
by Ada Ferrer
Scribner, £20, pp. 384

Cuba's revolutionary spirit is giving out. Donald Trump has called on Cubans to 'make a deal before it's too late' and has threatened military action. More than six decades on from the *revolución* of 1959, all talk is of the Yanqui dollar and how to acquire it. The scramble for greenbacks has fed into Cuba's sex industry. In the dollar-happy resort of Varadero, the locals suffer police surveillance and the indignity of rationed food while prostitutes as young as 15 hover outside the motels.

Yet for all the hardship and belt-tightening, Cuba commands sympathy from the international left as a last bastion of communism. In his left-leaning *Cuba: A New History* (2004), the British journalist Richard Gott argued that the island was unlikely to return to the capitalist Babylon it had been under President Batista, Fidel Castro's predecessor, as Cubans were immunised against the seductions of the market. Time will tell. Gott resigned from the *Guardian* in 1994 after he was exposed as a KGB agent of influence.

Havana has long been a favourite with fashion photographers and journalists, drawn to the picturesque decay of collapsing seafront promenades and salt-eaten arcades. The prevalence of big, finny American automobiles awed the BBC culture correspondent Stephen Smith who, 30 years ago, bumped round the island in the back of a 1950 Dodge. Smith's homage to Cuba, *Land of Miracles* (1997), was a semi-humorous evocation of life on the beautiful, bedevilled island. The bicycle-riding Dervla Murphy, confessedly a staunch Castroist, published her naively adoring account of Cuba, *The Island that Dared*, in 2008.

One of the difficulties of writing a travel book about Cuba is that it is hardly possible to travel around the island. Public transport is a dead loss. Cuba is no longer much of a Caribbean holiday destination. However, J.S. Tennant's terrier-like determination to explore out-of-the-way places there elevates him above the scoundrel category of travel writer. *Mrs Gargantua*, his first book, is scarcely conventional travel. It takes its title from the celebrity circus gorilla that a US heiress raised on her estate in Cuba in the early 1930s. In pages of finely crafted prose, Tennant describes Guantanamo city in southeastern Cuba, near where the Americans have a detention facility as well as a military base, complete with a drive-in movie theatre and a KFC. He visits the Bay of Pigs, where, in 1961, CIA-trained Cuban exiles attempted the disastrous invasion that led Castro to align himself with the Soviet Union. (The 1959 overthrow of Batista was not socialist in origin but, Tennant reminds us, nationalist-patriotic.)

Havana might once again become the louche gambling hole and fleshpot it had been under Batista

Tennant has been visiting Cuba since 2010. In that time he has got to know the regime's dreary 'prating' on the glories of the revolution and crude sloganeering against Uncle Sam. America's trade embargo – in force since 1962 – has battered the island's economy. Castro, who died in 2016, was a father figure to many Cubans, but his younger brother Raúl, who took over as president in 2008, is now an old greybeard who has been put out to pasture after ten years in post. With no communist allies anywhere in the world to save Cuba from ruination, the island's return to the US sphere is perhaps inevitable. It could be reborn as a Caribbean colony of Las Vegas, with Havana once more the louche gambling hole and fleshpot it had been under Batista. (All this was foretold, incidentally, in Martin Cruz Smith's superlative 1999 thriller *Havana Bay*, which imagines a hoodlum conspiracy to turn Cuba's capital into a playground for American pleasure-seekers.)

Fidel's macho vanity (Tennant refers to his 'pharaonic gigantomania') went hand-in-hand with his persecution of homosexuals, hippies, Catholic priests and other perceived state enemies. But, like Harold Pinter and others before him, Tennant finds it hard to quibble with the improvements he and his disciples made in health and literacy. Under Batista, almost half of Cuba's rural population was illiterate; now only two per cent of Cuban adults are unable to read and write. Unquestionably there are things to admire in the country's post-Batista revolutionary doctrine.

Batista was Castro's *bête noire*. For a quarter of a century this pro-US president pandered to Lucky Luciano and other Italo-American mobsters who submerged rivals in wet concrete even as they held court in Havana's plushly upholstered Hotel Nacional. Castro's left-hand man, the Argentine-born medical doctor Ernesto Guevara, sought to obliterate all trace of the Batista regime. He set up labour camps in Havana and supervised an estimated 550 executions. Fidelistas nicknamed him 'Che' – 'mate' – after his comradely leadership. Che's Marxist-Leninist dream of social equality is almost meaningless today.

Che Guevara's biographer Jon Lee Anderson (who provides a blurb for *Mrs Gargantua*) proved conclusively that it was Castro who sent Che to Bolivia in the spring of 1966 in order to champion revolutionary causes beyond the Caribbean. The decision led to Che's death at the age of 39, during a half-baked guerrilla insurrection. Gott was the first foreign reporter to see the revolutionary's bullet-punctured body laid out for inspection in a remote Bolivian schoolroom in 1967. All that remained of Che after a couple of days, Tennant tells us, were his severed hands, which had been preserved in formaldehyde for fingerprint identification in Havana. Were he alive today, he would be 98.

Tennant has no thesis to prove about

JOCHEN BLUME/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Fidel Castro in 1961. His macho vanity went hand-in-hand with his persecution of homosexuals, hippies, Catholic priests and other perceived state enemies

Cuba; plain curiosity motivates his interest. In one brilliant chapter, 'Chroniclers, Corsairs and Clerics', he considers the life of the Cuba-based Spanish missionary Bartolomé de las Casas, who condemned the enslavement of indigenous Indians in the Americas with such vehemence that by the year 1542 he had achieved its abolition. Cuba's Taino-Arawak population had been almost obliterated by the slave-driving Spanish, who used Havana as a provisioning port for their conquest of the New World. In a bid to protect Cuba's pre-Hispanic peoples, Las Casas recommended the importation of captive Africans. To this odd twist of philanthropy we owe the arrival in Cuba of a total of 780,000 Africans and the beginning of all subsequent sorrows in the sugar-rich Caribbean.

An erudite writer, Tennant devotes several pages to the Genoese navigator Christopher Columbus, whose search for gold in Cuban waters inevitably involved him in slavery. Tennant's interest is piqued, too, by the Cuban animist cult of Santería, which involves spirit-possession and offerings of sacrificial cockerels' blood. Castro's crackdown on religion has not prevented Cubans from practising this variant of Haitian Vodou (or voodoo, to use the non-PC term): Santería is inseparable from Cuba's Afro-Hispanic identity.

From start to finish I was absorbed by this shiningly intelligent and original amalgam of history and travel. Cuba might be 'on the skids', as the author puts it, but the island presents a unique case of survival against the odds. *Mrs Gargantua* is the best book you are likely to read on Cuba for ages.

Ada Ferrer, the Pulitzer-winning Cuban-American historian, abandoned the island with her mother in 1963, a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis. She now lives in the New York area. In her affecting memoir, *Keeper of My Kin*, Ferrer tells how her mother Adelaida made the painful decision to leave behind her son, nine-year-old Poly. Having settled in Miami, Adelaida got a job as a factory seamstress and mingled with stridently anti-communist fellow Cuban refugees. Two decades later, in 1980, Poly made his way to the US in a Castro-sanctioned mass exodus of 125,000 Cubans, only to develop schizophrenia. In his mental disarray, Poly had many run-ins with the law in the US and was eventually charged with attempted murder. Ferrer went back to Cuba for the first time in 1990, where she immersed herself in the state archives and scrutinised her family history for signs of emotional instability.

I visited three years later, in the winter of 1993, when the Soviet market for Castro's sugar had dried up and despair hung over the island. On the return flight I sat next to Arthur Scargill's wife, Anne, who was reading a copy of the Cuban Communist party daily *Granma* (named after the cabin cruiser that ferried Fidel and Che from Mexico to begin their uprising in 1956.) She was part of a contingent of British miners' wives who had gone to donate obsolete coalfield equipment – earmuffs, hard hats – to Cuba's ailing copper industry.

Trump himself has little interest in the country's mining and oil reserves (which pale beside those of Venezuela), but golf tourism and the hospitality industry are another matter. 'I do believe I'll be having the honour of taking Cuba,' Trump said recently, apparently meaning it. *¡Viva Cuba!* El Trumpo is coming!

Alex Murdaugh at the Colleton County Courthouse, South Carolina, in 2022

TRACY GLANTZ/THE STATE/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICES VIA GETTY IMAGES

A psychological puzzle

Scott Bradfield

The Family Man: Blood and Betrayal in the House of Murdaugh
by James Lasdun
Jonathan Cape, £22, pp. 352

The central figure of *The Family Man*, the lawyer Alex Murdaugh (pronounced 'Murdock'), spends his life getting implicated in so many heinous, melodramatic crimes that he seems cobbled together by a cabal of tabloid and commercial publishers, crime podcasters and providers of big budget cinematic sleaze. Memorably referred to by psychopathologists and public prosecutors as a 'family annihilator' (imagine a little bit of Medea, a little bit of the Menendez brothers and a whole lot of Oedipus Rex), he was arrested in 2021 for slaughtering his wife Maggie and their youngest son Paul with the same sort of high-tech military weaponry that he enjoyed wielding around his family compound to hunt hogs, and which visitors often found lying randomly about his home and gardens. He even gave some of the guns nicknames.

Belonging to the fourth generation of a celebrated (and scandal-prone) South Carolina family, Murdaugh was charismatic, well-liked and extremely successful at litigating settlements for his clients. At the same time he was involved in decades of rampant illegality – embezzling from those same clients, fixing juries, evidence tampering and spending millions of dollars on opioids which he devoured himself or sold to fellow Carolinians and/or international drug cartels. (One of the many unresolved mysteries of this absorbing book is what Murdaugh did with all those millions in drugs.) In other words, Murdaugh may have achieved his first notoriety as a family annihilator, but he deserved to be recognised for much, much more. In fact he was such a successful and even popular dissembler that these other crimes weren't discovered until police began investigating the murder of his wife and son.

When Murdaugh wasn't committing crimes, he was apologising for them, even while committing further crimes

In many ways, Murdaugh is the perfect subject for James Lasdun's crime investigation. An excellent writer of short stories and novels (notably *The Horned Man* and *The Fall Guy*), Lasdun has shown a special affection for a sort of middle-class Oxbridge youth who's incapable of seeing himself as others see him – a Ripleyesque individual who makes up his own rules as he goes along and believes nobody else knows how deeply unpleasant he is. Murdaugh is almost an inversion of these anti-heroes – superficially charming and ruthlessly manipulative of both strangers and family, and someone who so successfully masks his repellent inner nature that his crimes grow increasingly brazen and unhinged.

Unlike Truman Capote or Norman Mailer, Lasdun doesn't develop a relationship with this awful protagonist but keeps tabs on him from behind the bushes of smart, objective third-party reportage – detailed court transcripts, police investigations – and his own interviews with Murdaugh's friends and associates. He also manages to keep a clear narrative track of Murdaugh's various crimes and possible crimes – such as when, shortly after the murder of his wife and son, he hired a relative to shoot him in the head on a quiet country road in order (he claims) to provide his surviving son with the insurance money. (Miraculously, and quite accidentally, he survived with only minor injuries.)

When Murdaugh wasn't committing crimes, he was apologising for them – often profusely – even in the midst of committing further crimes, with the result of, yes, more apologies. The most unsettling vision of him comes near the end of his trial for financial fraud, after he sits listening through days of testimony by family members and former clients (many of them quite poor) whom he stole from. He responds with hours of drippingly insincere apologies – making him seem like an annihilator of human patience more than anything:

> I am so sorry that I destroyed my family's reputation with these terrible things that I have done. I am so sorry that my actions that I am pleading guilty to here today somehow made people on social media and in the media think that it's

> okay to falsely attack two of the three best men that I've ever known, and that's my father and my grandfather ...

Sitting in the public seats, Lasdun describes the performance with neither sympathy nor contempt:

> On it went, remorse, pride, protestations of love, the superlatives heaped on his nearest and dearest, which had the effect of suggesting that he, too, would have been one of these paragons had he not been too proud to get help with his addiction. The restlessness in the courtroom turned to an increasingly bridling impatience. One of the prosecuting attorneys began conspicuously thumbing her phone. It was beyond unseemly for the victims to be subjected to this torrent of words that had nothing at all to do with them, and you could practically hear people wondering why the judge was allowing it.

The Family Man – initially begun as a series of articles for the *New Yorker* – might seem somewhat belated after two miniseries on the same story from Netflix and HBO, not to mention endless news coverage and several one-shot cable adaptations. But with Murdaugh's recent successful appeal of his murder conviction, the book does what none of these other versions did: make clear how impenetrable the character of this man and his crimes remain – especially when he's apologising for them.

Dangerous liaisons

Emily Goulding

Family Friends
by Chloë Ashby
Fig Tree, £16.99, pp. 336

'Across the courtyard the water glistens a pale blue, the sun's rays shimmering on its surface. The surrounding garden is wild and overgrown with trees and bushes tinged reddish orange, overlooking a valley of scorched grass fields.' This is the setting of Chloë Ashby's *Family Friends*. Taking place over one eventful holiday between old university friends in the south of France, it's a sun-soaked work simmering with secrets that lurk just below the surface.

First, a look at our cast of characters. There's the 'endlessly reliable' Maggie, with weak, 'beautiful in a boyish way' Will and their two children, Alice and 'gangly' teenage Sammy. They're spending a week with the wealthy art dealer Lydia, charismatic and chic, whose family home they're staying in, and her leonine husband Roland, who started out as her professor. An added complication is Roland's 18-year-old daughter Issy from his first marriage, unnerving in her beauty and grieving the loss of her mother.

It's immediately clear that, despite the couples' initial closeness, there's a storm threatening to break between them, disrupting both the holiday and their long friendship. Ashby flits between the present and their past, as well as perspectives, starting at university and moving forward throughout the years. In other hands, the denouement could be obvious in its anticipation; but Ashby handles dialogue and subtext masterfully, allowing us to view each exchange from every angle and to make up our own minds as to who exactly is in the wrong.

Much of the tension derives from the romantic history between Lydia and Will. We learn about this through devastatingly sensual flashbacks and through the facade they maintain, which becomes less and less convincing. There's a real sense of a clawing back to their youth, something made even more apparent through the burgeoning relationship that forms between Issy and Sammy. The latter two tread the line between childhood and adulthood, with 'limbs tangled like fizzy strawberry laces', while Lydia and Will's spark feels born more out of desperation than anything else.

A portrait of long-standing friendships and the ways in which they can be warped, the novel is a sharp insight into the lengths to which we'll go to preserve the ways we view ourselves, and others view us.

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The Prodigal Veep

Nick Spencer

Communion: Finding My Way Back to Faith
by J.D. Vance
William Collins, £20, pp. 304

'Read *Hillbilly Elegy*,' a friend messaged me a decade ago. 'The author really gets it.' So I did, and indeed he did. The young and then obscure J.D. Vance showed, through his family travails in Appalachia, how both Republicans and Democrats had in their different ways screwed blue collar, just-about-working-class families like his. The book went platinum and launched his public career.

Three things saved the young Vance from the fate that awaited people like him: a fiercely defensive and religious grandmother ('Mamaw'), enlisting in the US Marines, and evangelical Christianity. He fell away from this last, however, as he discovered that his fundamentalist faith may have had community love in spades but was very short on good answers to big questions.

Communion is the story of his return to faith, this time in the form of Catholicism, a kind of Parable of the Prodigal Veep. It's really two books in one. Vance reveals that he finished the initial draft seven years ago, when he was received into the church and not long after he considered running for the Senate. Accordingly, the first 175 pages tell the story of his journey in, from and back to faith, while the rest of the book focuses more, if not exclusively, on the public and political implications of that faith. The parts do cohere, however, as Vance's meta-theme is how Christianity offers the redemptive structure and hope that can put a life (like his) and a civilisation (like the West) back together again.

Some of the autobiography will be familiar to readers of *Hillbilly Elegy*. This particular prodigal did not reject his home with the vehemence of the original – he retained a deep affection for family and community throughout – but he did develop a kind of intellectual contempt for the 'wishy-washy' theological banalities in which he was nurtured. Nor did the Prodigal Veep squander his wealth on wild living. On the contrary, his rebellion saw him striving soullessly for wealth and recognition like so many other law graduates of Yale. However, falling in love (his Hindu wife Usha is a constant presence and the heroine of the book), befriending Peter Thiel, reading René Girard and other serious thinkers and finding some intelligent priests to talk to brought him back.

If you have any sympathy with the idea that an encounter with God can reform a life – this reviewer does – reading about it when it happens is never a waste of time. But it is not an insult to say there is nothing especially penetrating or novel here. Vance is not the first person to have found C.S. Lewis an inspiration and he won't be the last. This particular parable is of interest, and will be reviewed widely, primarily because it comes from the pen of the most prominent Catholic in the world, if you don't include the Pope.

It would be a cheap shot to say at this point 'and J.D. Vance doesn't' – cheap and untrue. Vance takes the dogma and authority of his Church seriously. But Donald Trump's recent attack on Leo XIV, and Vance's hesitant but clear defence of his political boss, is just one of the stories that has brought the VP's political Catholicism on to the front page. Does Vance really mean it, we wonder, or is he tacking to a helpful theological wind, just as he did to the political one, when, having once called himself a 'never-Trump guy', he forgot his principles just as the President came to him with a job offer.

Communion gives a firm and convincing answer to that question. Vance is a genuine believer, sincere and serious about both Christ and the Church. He wants to see fruits from this faith – 'by their fruits shall ye know them' is a constant refrain in the book – and is clearly eager to be a good husband and father. Moreover, he wants to see such beliefs bear social fruits, and there is much in the book that echoes the post-liberal music of *Hillbilly Elegy* which excited so many pundits. *Communion* criticises both Democrats for putting personal liberty over everything else and Republicans even more for putting profits above workers.

The same man who obsesses about virtue is happy to work as chief henchman for a venal moral gargoyle

Yet, of course, the same man who obsesses about virtue and character is happy to work as chief henchman for a thin-skinned, venal, narcissistic, pussy-grabbing moral gargoyle; treat alleged allies like they're recalcitrant children; and dismiss political opponents as 'a bunch of childless cat ladies' (a comment for which he apologises). Curiously, Trump himself is almost invisible in the memoir, despite having had as transformative an effect on the author as Mamaw or Usha. The book repeatedly refers to 'the Trump Administration', rarely to the President himself.

Perhaps Vance is subtly distancing himself from the Egotist-in-Chief, at least as far as his current job allows. Or maybe Trump doesn't fit neatly into a book extolling the virtues of faith, character and Christianity. Or perhaps Vance doesn't want us to dwell too long on how awkward a pairing his Catholic faith and some of the policies of the new administration – such as the hunting down of illegal migrants or the cutting of overseas aid – is. Towards the end he admits: 'Politics is a dirty business sometimes, in which you have to make compromises.' Quite.

Conspiracy theories

Stuart Evers

Frame 37
by Nicholas Shakespeare
Harvill, £20, pp. 384

In photography, balance, whether radial, conceptual or symmetrical, is critical to the success of a composition. An unbalanced photograph can confuse, obfuscate or otherwise diminish an image. It is the same for a literary writer (Nicholas Shakespeare has twice been Booker-longlisted) taking on the thriller genre. Finding an equilibrium between prose styling and fine plotting requires considerable skill and a gentle touch. In his second outing for the former journalist John Dyer, Shakespeare treads this tightrope nimbly.

Following the events of *The Sandpit* (2020), Dyer is in Tasmania, engaged in research for a book on the Tupian peoples of the Amazon. He is soon interrupted by a voice from the past, that of Miguel Girondo de Belew, an Argentinian photo-journalist. An old mutual friend has recently been found dead in an apparent hit-and-run, but Miguel suspects a deeper conspiracy. Fearing for his own safety, he begs Dyer to meet him in Argentina to discuss his findings face to face, as he believes Dyer is the only one who can break the story.

What follows is a novel perhaps more in conversation with the paranoid thrillers of the 1970s – *The Parallax View* and *Three Days of the Condor* especially – than with Graham Greene or John le Carré, with whom Shakespeare has sometimes been compared. The early 1980s sections that burrow back into the young lives of Dyer and Miguel are hugely evocative of the smoky, drink-soaked possibilities of youth, as well as the dangers lurking in the shadows of Argentina's Dirty War. Four decades on, the legacy of that time gives Shakespeare the opportunity to explore the dynamics of power and accountability in a post-populist world order, as well as raise the personal stakes for Dyer.

Frame 37 has some compelling set pieces and several engaging characters – the quietly amoral Warmuth, a diminutive fixer involved in finding the next candidate for president, is a particular highlight – but it is not without its idiosyncrasies. The constant switching of tense from past to present is baffling. Similarly, some of the characters' names are wildly distracting. It's hard, for example, to take a central antagonist called 'Talcy Malcy' seriously, while metaphors can stretch over several lines, making less sense the longer they go on.

Those caveats aside, *Frame 37* is an intelligent, suspenseful take on classic thriller tropes that is nonetheless rooted in the mess of the here and now. It is an intriguing blend that's sure to see Dyer back for a third outing.

PICTURES FROM HISTORY / UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Japanese soldiers display a skull and crossbones flag in occupied Manchuria in 1933

The bigger picture

Christopher Harding

Collapse: A Global History of the Second World War, 1931-1941

by Jonathan Fennell

Viking, £30, pp. 752

More than 80 years after it ended, we are still living through the aftermath of the second world war. When people use the word 'post-war' they invariably mean this war and the changes it wrought upon international relations, trade, economics, domestic politics, social values and much more besides. Yet it remains all too easy, certainly in the English-speaking world, to cleave to a rather parochial view of that conflict as something that ended up spreading to lots of exotic places while still ultimately concerning the great battle between good and evil that was the Allies vs the Nazis. Can there be any corner of Hitler's psyche, any charming detail of the home front in Britain, which remains unprobed in books, TV programmes and museum exhibits?

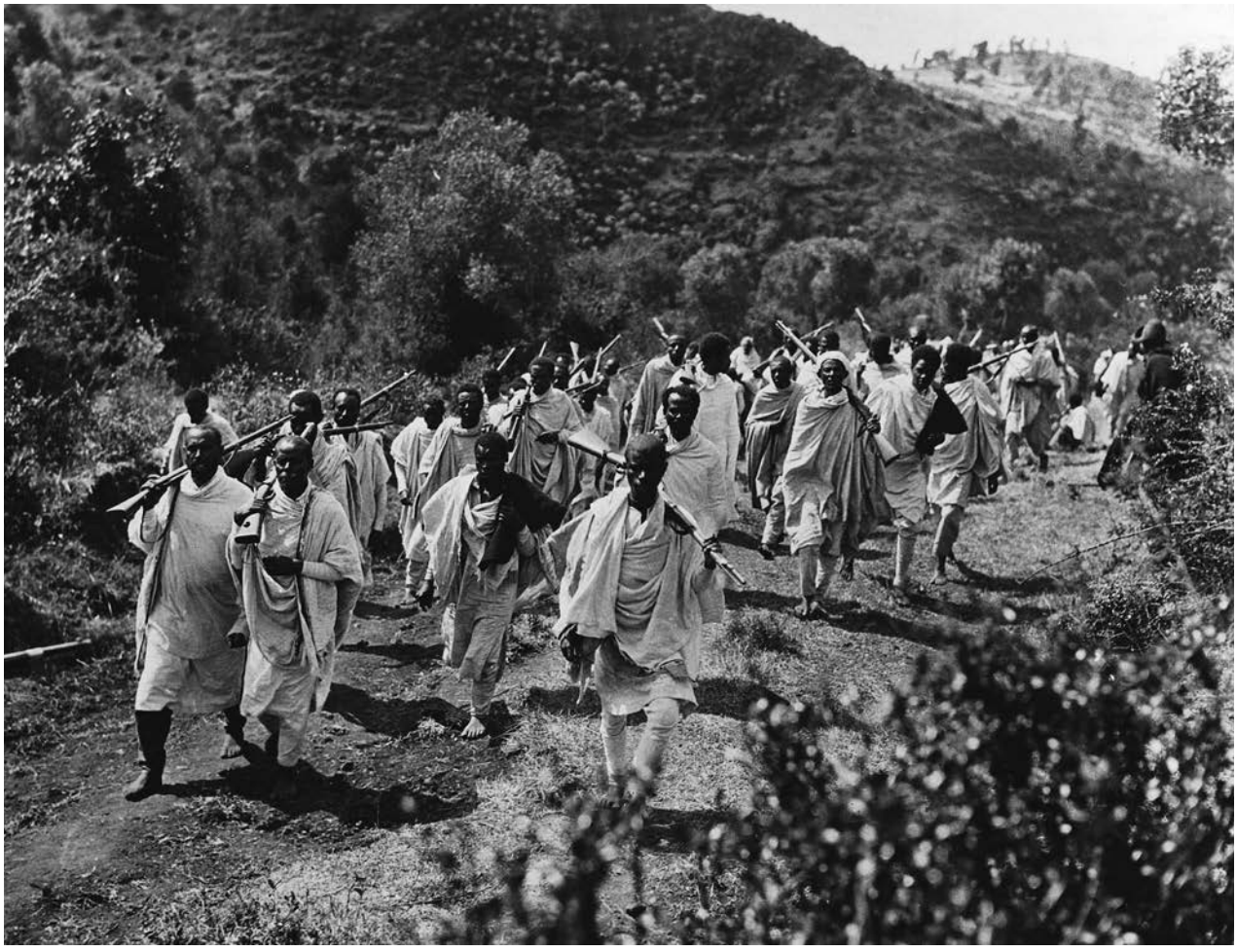
Less common, even now, is a view of the war as a conflict that was global from the ground upwards – defined by interconnected economies and by the differential impact on people around the world of the same technological and ideological innovations, from air power to workers' rights. Attempts to tell a global story face daunting challenges, as Jonathan Fennell admits early on in *Collapse*, the first part of a trilogy that sets out to offer just such an account of the war. Scholarship is now so extensive that no one can reasonably claim mastery; the archival material available is so vast that one must make choices early on about focus and texture. A historian must also put their head above the parapet and advance a foundational argument, or at least an organising thought, for the complex narrative weave to come.

Richard Overy managed this in his own global history of the second world war, *Blood and Ruins*, arguing that the period from Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 to the end of major hostilities in 1945 should be understood as the last great imperial war: an attempt by Germany, Italy and Japan, as relative latecomers to empire, to challenge Britain, France, the US and the Netherlands.

The great strength of the approach taken by Fennell, who is professor of the history of war and society at King's College, London, can be summed up in a word: sentiment. In seeking to integrate not just regions of the world but also types of history – military, economic, cultural and more – he presses the idea that tens of millions of people actively gave shape to events through their 'hopes, fears and attitudes', which fired 'processes of radicalisation and escalation that cumulatively led to a worldwide total war'.

Sentiment works because desiring a better life or striving to protect loved ones in profoundly uncertain times connects people living in cultures as distant from one another as Ethiopia and Japan, without blurring meaningful differences between these societies. It adds colour to what could all too easily become a dry recitation of quasi-familiar facts in compressed form. And by gradually building up in readers' minds an emotional portrait of each participating country and its people, it makes it easier – for this reader, at least – to retain a grasp of what is happening where and when during the regular shifts between locations that a history of this type demands.

Collapse unfolds across 14 lengthy chapters, whose abstract titles and lack of dates may frustrate some readers but which are impressively global in structure right from the start. We are picked up and moved to another side of the world every few pages; but by focusing on common concerns across nations, from strategic interests to economic fortunes, Fennell makes these transitions feel smooth and meaningful. His judgment in condensing complex moments is impeccable and his eye



HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Barefoot Ethiopian troops on the march against the Italian invasion in 1935

for a telling personal story unerring, from the Ethiopian woman who goes from making flatbread to being conscripted by her husband for war against Italy to the Japanese soldier who writes with disgust about the casual violence meted out by boorish senior officers. Indeed, morale is a big theme for Fennell, and much of the impressive archival work that has gone into this book focuses on letters, censorship and the concern shown by national authorities for their populations' shifting feelings about the war.

Readers who are relatively unfamiliar with the general history of the second world war might find *Collapse* a little abbreviated and episodic; and anyone wanting to understand the conflict from a particular country's point of view would of course do better with a national history. But for the no doubt large number of people who want to get an idea of a world at war, rather than a European war playing out across the world, the book is sensitive, thoughtful and admirably well-informed. China at last earns its rightful – if distinctly grim – place in this story, as do other parts of Asia and Africa, making for a weighty achievement which will have readers clearing space on their bookshelves for parts II and III.

Artistic licence

Christopher Shrimpton

Exhibition
by Alex Hyde
Granta, £14.99, pp. 256

Exhibition, Alex Hyde's second novel, recounts the intimate, messy, ambiguous and ultimately ill-fated relationship between two fictionalised Young British Artists in the early 1990s.

Rosie 'Rabble' Stone, the narrator, is a gifted but grounded Mancunian photographer, newly arrived in London to begin her studies at a prestigious art school. There she meets, and soon moves in with, a beautiful and accomplished (and throughout nameless) figurative artist destined for greatness. They are inspired by, though very different from, Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas and the works they produced in this period.

The story begins in Brixton, at an 'upside-down' house to which Rabble has been directed to find lodgings. She is greeted at the door by the artist (who is addressed as 'you' throughout) and is immediately enraptured: 'You. When you answered the door to the Brixton house, dressing gown and cigarette hand languidly bent back at the wrist, smoke wisping where you stood.' The young women soon become inseparable – a 'double act' – and their artwork increasingly collaborative and inextricable: 'It was chemistry, something we had, something we made between ourselves, both of us being used.'

It soon becomes clear, however, that one of them is being used rather more than the other. Rabble, who is working class – 'the real deal: common people, fag ends, trash' – quickly falls by the wayside as her more privileged friend's career takes off, helped in no small part by some prints of Rab's passed off as her own. 'She doesn't mind, do you Rab?', the artist assures an incensed mutual friend. Rabble doesn't mind, actually, but it still marks a parting of the ways. For the artist, it's gallery openings in Berlin and sell-out shows in New York; for Rabble, it's back to Manchester to work part-time in a pub and care for her ailing mother.

Exhibition is, in an intriguing way, a love story. Indeed it reads very much like a love letter, as it recounts how two women, seemingly fated to be together, lose and then find each other again over the years and across continents. It is both sensuous and

sordid, and utterly immersive – think of the unmade beds and unguarded self-portraits of Emin and Lucas. If the narrative is somewhat aimless and the denouement a little forced ('A hurricane. You couldn't make it up.'), that is more than compensated for by the fineness of observation and surety of tone that bring this period and these characters to life.

A modern fairy story

Annie Walton Doyle

Dark is the Morning
by Rupert Thomson
Apollo, £18, pp. 256

As a prolific writer of literary fiction, Rupert Thomson has had plenty of practice in creating a good story. In *Dark is the Morning,* he seems drawn to the question of whether a satisfactory narrative structure can be imposed on life. The tug between the meaningless, chaotic nature of reality and the more conventional art of storytelling is at the centre of the novel, which concerns the ill-fated romance between the narrator, Gino, and the enigmatic Franca. Thomson even appears awkward about how neatly fabular this tale turns out to be in his opening chapter: 'I still find the whole thing hard to believe.'

This self-consciousness is apparent throughout, with Thomson making repeated reference to the power of storytelling in his characters' lives. Gino needs 'a story for myself, a story I could live with'. Indeed, everyone is 'looking for something that will make them feel better about their lives'. Words have the capacity to turn the meaningless into the profound; they are 'able to open up a whole new world with one short sentence'.

Thomson also leans heavily on the weird, with whimsical elements peppered throughout. The setting of Italy's Abruzzo region is 'characterised by a deep affinity with magic and superstition'. Witchcraft, mythology, urban legends, dreams and telepathy seem as ordinary a part of life as Gino's job in IT at Lidl. The novel reads like a modern fairy tale, combining conventional narrative tropes with the deeply strange and inexplicable. By imposing these neat storytelling practices on what is essentially an exploration of masculine psychological unravelling, Thomson suggests that what makes a story traditional is also what makes it inherently fantastical.

Fate, too, plays a major role. Our doomed couple are 'bound in a covenant' together that is 'written in the stars'. This at least serves to deliver a more satisfying 'moral of the story', as jealous Gino can excuse himself from taking responsibility for his actions, and instead 'marvel at the strangeness of it all'.

The Stick

You can hear it
coming down the road:
the stick of old age.
No Yeats. No rage.

Insistent, pervasive,
it permeates the brain
like acid.
Like an insistent stain.

Inside the carapace
it works its insidious way
into the very heart of existence.
There to stay.

Silent inside the darkness
hidden from all evidence,
it finds its way alone
into the very marrow, through the bone.

The tap, tap, tap of time
beating its threatening percussions
on the brain.
Insistent. Like pain.

Not a hint of wind.
From leaves, not the slightest stir.
The sky clear.
But, very near,

that tap, tap, tapping
towards the light
comes time,
comes anxiety, comes fright:

persistent,
inevitable,
the hammer of existence, the sword of now,
the utter meaningless of why and how,

beating relentlessly
on the stubborn anvil of all that was,
that tide from a remote sea
of all that is, and all that is to be.

– Michael Cullup

GEORGIANA DALIAS/WWE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Stunt show: Trick Williams in action against Oba Femi (left) in Los Angeles last year

In the squared circle

Ian Sansom

Lords of the Ring: The World According to Wrestling
by Dan Higgins
Constable, £25, pp. 320

For British readers of a certain age, wrestling occupies a very particular place in the collective memory. Long before the triumph of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), long before the pyrotechnics and the Trump-adjacent billionaire promoters, there were those long-lost innocent Saturday afternoons watching *World of Sport* with your nan, as men with cauliflower ears, wearing improbable hand-stitched trunks, wrestled in grim, determined, municipal fashion in local leisure centres and town halls up and down the land.

If your last points of wrestling reference are those great monoliths Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks lumbering around like coal-fired power stations, today's wrestling world is almost unrecognisable. It's no longer a regional live entertainment business that happens to be televised; it's a global media behemoth, part sport, part soap opera, part stunt show, part Hollywood franchise, worth billions of dollars – and arguably in part responsible for the absurd spectacle that is politics today.

Dan Higgins's *Lords of the Ring* is a useful introductory guide to this new era. If you already get your wrestling news from the 'dirt sheets' – F4WOnline and the endlessly proliferating wrestling podcasts and social media feeds – you're not going to learn much new here. But if you don't know your Rikishi Phatu from your Muhammad Hassan and you want to understand why half the world seems perfectly happy to be living in an alternative universe inhabited by unbelievable goodies and baddies, this might be the place to start.

The book consists of almost 60 very short chapters which bounce around from subject to subject and from place to place – from Zoom interviews to actual encounters with wrestlers, journalists and fans at conventions. Higgins narrates everything in that ever so slightly annoying historic present podcast style, which tends to mistake immediacy for vividness: 'It's 2013 and Mark Henry is walking to the ring in Grand Rapids, Michigan, dressed in a striking salmon-coloured blazer and a pink-and-blue striped tie.' Buckle up for the smack-downs.

From amid all the confusion and carnage a few key insights emerge. Higgins is very good at teasing out nice little anecdotes and stories from the wrestlers he interviews. The great, improbable Mick Foley, who wrestled for almost 30 years as Mankind, Cactus Jack and Dude Love, comes across as a thoroughly nice sort of chap; and it's wonderful to hear from a pioneer of women's wrestling, Jayne Porter, aka Klondyke Kate. Higgins's low-key, respectful approach to these conversations is an important reminder of the blurred boundaries between performance and reality, life and art. Klondyke Kate, for example, now lives in Weymouth, where she fosters children and works with disadvantaged youngsters.

But there are a lot of important and interesting things to be said about wrestling that Higgins doesn't quite get round to. Admittedly, once you start treating the sport, Roland Barthes-like, as a metaphor for everything, it's not long before everything starts looking like wrestling: not every headlock conceals a useful theory of late-stage capitalism and not every bout requires an accompanying seminar in cultural studies. Nonetheless, wrestling isn't merely entertainment. It's one of the stories – and these days one of the most important and popular ones – that societies tell themselves about themselves.

This is why the book is perhaps rather more significant than it might appear. Like it or not, American wrestling has exported itself around the globe so successfully that it has become one of the dominant languages of contemporary popular culture. It is no longer just an eccentric pastime enjoyed by a small, devoted minority: increasingly, it's how we conduct ourselves in public life. And we're all expected to play along.

The word to describe this phenomenon in wrestling – and Higgins devotes a chapter to it – is 'kayfabe': the convention that the fictional world should be treated as real. We understand that matches are scripted, yet willingly suspend disbelief, much as audiences do with theatre or cinema. We all agree to participate in the illusion, which means that the key question is no longer 'Is it fake?' but 'Is it a good story?' Andy Burnham's comeback, Nigel Farage as heel, Donald Trump's endless feuds and grievances – Vince McMahon, the co-founder of WWE, might have scripted it all.

Lords of the Ring doesn't pursue such arguments. It is instead an energetic, accessible and often entertaining survey of modern wrestling and the people who devote their lives to it. But in an age when so much of public life resembles a wrestling storyline, understanding the sport begins to look rather less like a guilty pleasure than a civic necessity. If you'd told the audience at the Deeside Leisure Centre 40 years ago – if you'd told me – that one day the whole world would come to resemble professional wrestling, they'd probably have laughed. We're not laughing now.

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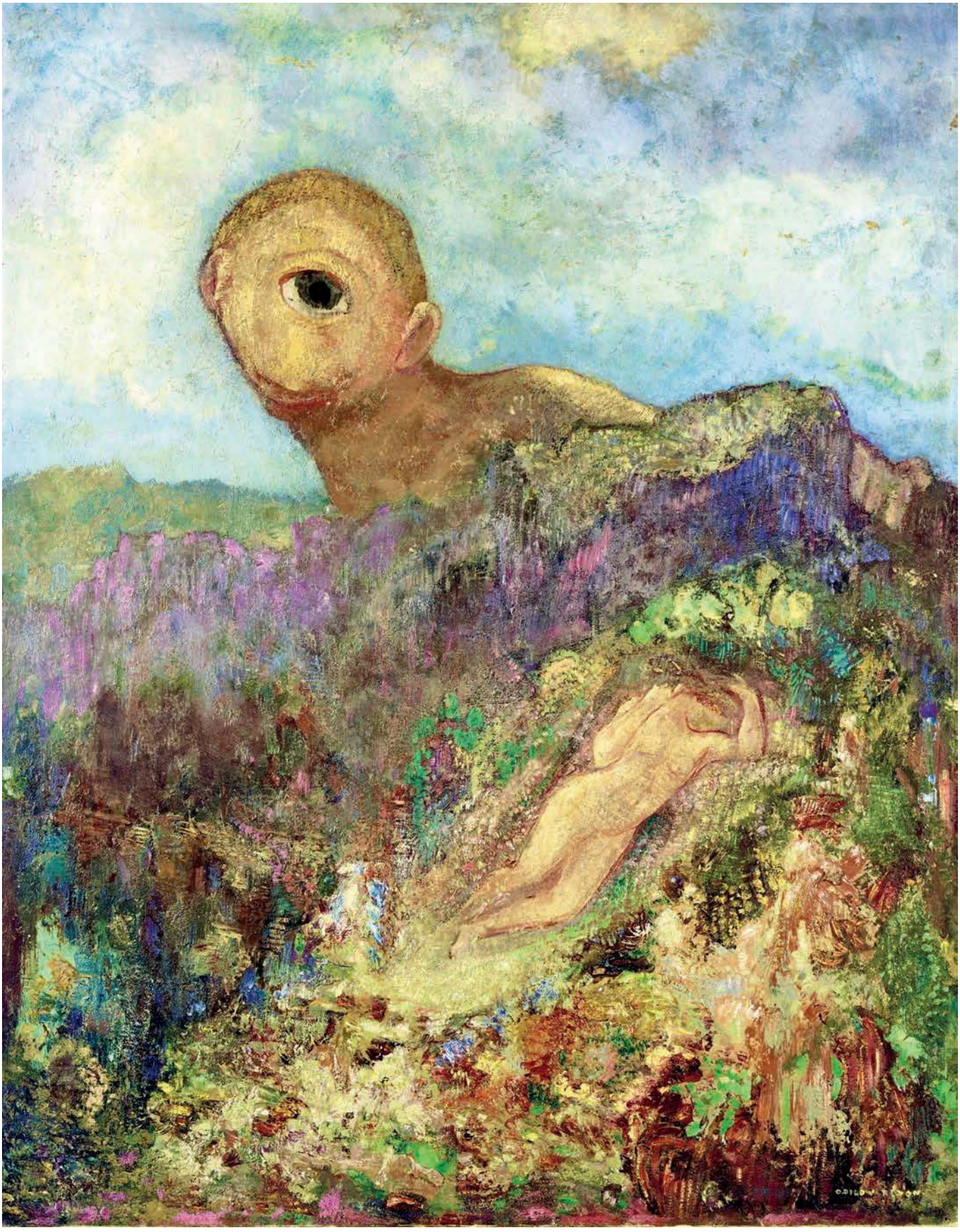

STEEVE-X-ART

'The Cyclops', c.1914, by Odilon Redon

Visions of the Odyssey

Can Christopher Nolan's film live up to the 2,700-year history of artworks depicting Homer's epic, asks *Matthew Wilson*

It's a noble story of one man struggling against monstrous odds, valiantly captaining his crew while trying to avoid being skewered and striving to reclaim his crown. Welcome to the chronicles of Christopher Nolan and his hubristic film adaptation of the *Odyssey*.

Will Nolan's *Odyssey* make us feel – as Keats did when reading George Chapman's translation of Homer – like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into our ken? Or will it be a thundering, 172-minute disappointment? Being a cinematic endeavour, the film should be judged more on its visuals than its script. And on that front, Nolan is pitting himself against a 2,700-year history of artworks depicting Homer's epic.

The oldest extant depiction can be found on the neck of the Eleusis Amphora, painted around 650 BC, showing Odysseus and his men blinding the cyclops Polyphemus. Like other early depictions of Odysseus's ten-year homeward journey it focuses on an action-packed set piece; elsewhere we get his travails with Scylla, Charybdis, the Sirens and Circe. Dramatic spectacles like these were ideal for vase painting, where forms were blocked out in silhouette and the inner details marked with incisions rather than the fluid line of a brush. Within these constraints, simplicity was paramount.

What got left out in these images were all the many nuances of psychology and motivation that make up the *Odyssey*. As anyone who has read it will know, the work is a copious and complex poem, stuffed with descriptions of things that can never be seen. How do you visually represent these non-visual subtleties? Polygnotus, one of the world's first great painters, offered a solution. In his mural of Odysseus's journey to the underworld at Delphi, he insinuated characters' inner personalities in sophisticated choreographies of gesture, facial expression and pose. The painting marked a turning point in the history of figurative art because it showed artists how to unveil an otherwise invisible quality.

But other strategies were available. Watch how nature becomes the leading character in the Casa di via Graziosa fresco cycle that now hangs in the Vatican Museums, painted in the first century BC. Yet again we encounter a dramatic centrepiece, where a team of gangly man-eating giants, the Laestrygonians, pound Odysseus's ships to smithereens. But here the landscape dominates the action. Nature is the star, the force that human affairs must bow down to, echoing divine will.

Apollonio di Giovanni's 'The Adventures of Ulysses' (1435-45) was originally made to decorate the side of a marriage chest and, rather than isolate a single telling episode, we get the whole story in beautiful and continuous narrative flow. Here we find all the principal characters decked out in Renaissance outfits, Odysseus in a magnificent gold suit. Then in the lower right-hand corner we see Nausicaa, the young seductress who discovers a shipwrecked Odysseus in Book VI, and offers him hospitality. It converts the poem into a tale of escape from sexual temptation towards monogamous virtue.

In Pintoricchio's 'Penelope with the Suitors' (*c*.1509) several episodes are cunningly compressed into a single scene. It offers the viewer a puzzle. We are in Penelope's room in Ithaca, where she is constructing her tapestry. The suitors who seek to take her husband's throne have been promised that she'll marry one of them once her weaving is complete. Every night, however, she unpicks her day's work. Pintoricchio has arranged the tableau so that the loom itself frames a view not only of Odysseus's ship, but also of his earlier misadventures with the Sirens and Circe. And in the foreground, the culmination of the *Odyssey*: our hero returned home in disguise to reclaim his throne and his wife. But which of the visitors is our Odysseus? Pintoricchio has hidden him away, secreted him among the suitors, stumbling through the doorway, holding a traveller's staff.

Being a cinematic endeavour, the film should be judged more on its visuals than its script

J.M.W. Turner's 'Ulysses deriding Polyphemus' (1829) offers a wide shot of the action. Having blinded Polyphemus and led an audacious breakout from his cave, Odysseus races to his ship and taunts the cyclops as he sails to freedom. Yet none of this stirs Turner as much as the gauzy effects of light patchworking the Sicilian shoreline in ripples of gold and lemon. But look closer and you will see the mythic creatures peppering the scene. A recumbent Polyphemus lolls on the mountaintop above the ship, phosphorescent sea-nymphs parade in front of the ship's bow, and Apollo's horses rear around the sun. Turner's vision of the *Odyssey* is every bit the romantic fantasy. Forget plot details and moral messages, the painter evokes a transcendent journey into the unknown through a manipulation of composition, colour and light.

For Victorian painters such as John William Waterhouse, the *Odyssey* was probed for its tales of conflict between the sexes, where a noble hero is forced to contend with femmes fatales. His 'Ulysses and the Sirens' (1891) is constructed every bit like a still from a movie, camera slightly elevated and close to the action. Unlike previous versions of the story stretching back to antiquity, the terror of the high seas and the menace of homicidal monsters are less of a threat than feminine seduction.

Even more of an erotic charge pours forth from Odilon Redon's 'The Cyclops' (1914), Polyphemus's phallic head and shoulders shown peeping voyeuristically over a clifftop at the supine Nereid Galatea. We are almost tempted to pity Odysseus's tormentor, cursed to live alone with his ugliness and animalistic instincts. He's not a predator in Redon's imagination but a victim of unrequited lust: his oversized eye fuelling his sexual desire, but his ungainliness making its realisation an impossibility.

You can establish something of Redon's intent from his 1878 statement about Gustave Moreau's 'Phaéton': 'I defy you, if you have entered for one instant the cold vaults of the academic temple, to find there a mind that rejuvenates antiquity in this way, with such an entire liberty.' Redon's liberation from antiquity's vault pilots us through a dreamscape in which the imagination rides triumphant over accuracy.

Which brings us back to Christopher Nolan's film. I've already bought my overpriced ticket and joined the throng of sceptics, half-anticipating a failure – but also hoping that the Muse might have decided to sing through Nolan and inspire him to live up to this 2,700-year tradition.

The Odyssey *is in cinemas from 17 July*.

© MINISTÈRE DE LA CULTURE FRANCE / ASSOCIATION DES AMIS DE JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE

'Florette Lartigue, Vence', 1954, by Jacques Henri Lartigue

Exhibitions

Shooting stars

Hermione Eyre

Jacques Henri Lartigue: Life in Colour
MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, until 4 October

Kyotographie: Kawada Kikuji x Iwane Ai
Japan House London, until 18 October

Will photography as an art form survive the age of Instagram? Now that we think we are all photographers, and curators and collectors too, constantly cropping, sifting, saving and storing, our sensibilities risk becoming blunted, and our attitudes blasé. Two new shows confirmed to me that galleries are going to have to be clever to maintain photography's hard-won status.

In Milton Keynes, the MK Gallery hosts a new retrospective of the photographer's photographer, Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986). Although on the weekday I visited it was empty as a tomb, the Insta generation would enjoy it; would probably recognise Lartigue as their kin, the first of their kind, a photo addict, who shot every day to archive the beauty he saw around him, and who, like a true millennial, said he struggled to remember anything unless he photographed it.

Lartigue was a sensitive boy born into privilege in the belle époque; as with Proust, you can feel in his work his lively, direct consciousness rubbing against the formality of his class and era. Lartigue's father was, handily, the eighth richest man in France, and a keen amateur photographer too, who shared his cameras with his son. The young Lartigue enjoyed making 3D stereoscopes for his family's entertainment (he was allowed to shoot 5,000 negatives!) and captured his brother Zissou's madcap experiments with homemade prototype aeroplanes, gliders, go-carts, bicycle-boats, and

so on. It all fed the films and imagination of Wes Anderson.

Aged 17 Lartigue laid eyes on his first colour photograph: 'I became nearly dizzy.' He started making stereoscopic autochromes, three-dimensional pictures in subtle colours, derived from dyed potato starch. There are ten to see here – one peeps through binoculars affixed to the false wall – charming, clunky portals into the past.

More riveting are the silver-gelatin prints of fashionistas walking their lapdogs in the Bois de Boulogne, which he shot between 1906 and 1911, and are now considered the first street photography. The women seem oblivious or dimly aware of Lartigue; he must already have had the art of self-effacement, the ability to become a plausible shadow, part of the scenery – a skill I observed in Dafydd Jones, also a genius reportage photographer, when I worked alongside him at the *Independent*.

Lartigue's work in colour is ravishing, off-beat and personal. By the time colour came in, all his family money had long since been lost between the first war and the Wall Street crash, and the family estate sold. Lartigue made a living working as a painter (like Cartier-Bresson, painting and photography were his twin loves) and receiving commissions from magazines and photo agencies. But he always maintained his quirky perspective. When *Point de Vue* sent him as an official reporter to cover the wedding of Grace Kelly and Prince Rainier III of Monaco in 1956, the shots he filed were of the crowds and the press. They went unpublished. His colour reportage from Lourdes in 1957 for a Catholic magazine is stunning, in a sombre and theatrical key, full of human understanding. His shots of Picasso presiding at a bullfight in Vallauris in 1955 were clearly taken from inside the ring, and even, if the viewers' faces are to be believed, during the fight.

The final series moved me to tears. I stumbled out of the space aware that it had packed a huge punch

The myth was always that Lartigue was 'discovered' at the age of 69 in 1963, when he arrived with his portfolio at MoMA in New York and was instantly offered a solo show. But this exhibition explains he had been prominent in France before that, sitting on committees to promote photography and exhibiting alongside Man Ray, Brassaï and Doisneau in the Gens d'Images show at the Galerie d'Orsay in 1955. The MoMA show only represented his breakthrough into international acclaim as an artist.

In 1979 he willed his archive as a 'donation' to France, and it forms the backbone of this show, so alongside a few lightboxes, we see here a selection from his scrapbooks: small to medium-sized photo prints stuck carefully on the pages, and captioned in felt tip. These are precious and personal exhibits, fascinating in their way, but they don't make the best case for his work as art.

Kyotographie, a show in the basement of Japan House in Kensington, never for a moment makes the same mistake. There is nothing prosaic about the display, in which large-format images, expertly lit, loom out of the dark. A sense of hallowed ceremony is quickly established. And there before us are the totemic images Kawada Kikuji took in Hiroshima in 1958 of the stained ceiling of the ruined dome, a busy building when it was caught at the centre of the blast. Abstracted shadows and cracks, it is left to us to consider what they represent.

Kawada, now 93, posts regularly on Instagram, aware he reaches more people there than would pick up a magazine. He seems energised by this new format for new work. But uploading his archive is a different matter. 'Scanning old work in various ways, something that always strikes me is how images seem to lose their old light once they have been converted into data,' he says. Data, it seems, has a different soul, for which we are still searching.

Paired with Kawada is the photographer Iwane Ai (*b.*1975) whose work explores the devastation of Fukushima. She photographed deserted avenues of cherry trees there during the pandemic looking very spooky, with glimpses of traditional ogre-like demons called *oni* as a way of conceptualising the radiation released from the power plant's meltdown. I didn't understand it all, but when I saw the final series, 'My Cherry', of images of her sister who died by her own hand in 2007, I was moved to tears, and stumbled out of the space aware that it had packed a huge punch.

Pop

Nowhere man

Michael Hann

Harry Styles
Wembley Stadium

For the first time at a gig, I spent much of Harry Styles's show thinking about the maths. He's cunningly doing his 68 shows in seven cities, with 12 of them at Wembley Stadium, which means he has transferred a significant amount of the costs of touring to the fans. In other ways fans are rewarded.

As is common when stars play stadiums, Styles spent little time on the main stage. Instead he peddled his wares from a series of walkways – around 350 yards of them, apparently – stretching way out into the crowd, along which he remained in near-constant movement. That meant an awful lot of people got to be at the barrier. At an estimate there were maybe 20,000 people who got within a few feet of Styles. That's as many people as fit in the whole O2.

Clever. Because what Styles offers above all else is vibes. There are no big dance routines; no grand theatrics. What there is choreographically all comes down to what Styles does himself. It's enough. He moves beautifully: loose and confident, throwing a few shapes, a couple of dance steps. He's not particularly voluble between songs, his voice is nothing out of the ordinary. All he's selling is himself: I'm Harry and I make everything better.

That's not to say that he's musically dull – even if he's never made a consistently good album from front to back. He had no problem filling a couple of hours without flagging; 'Watermelon Sugar' and 'As It Was' are the kind of tent poles most singers would love to have in their set. And around these was a sprinkling of plenty of other things: the taut funk of 'Dance No More', the churning synths of 'Aperture', the gorgeous ballad 'Fine Line'.

That stylistic slipperiness is central to Styles's cultural identity. He is someone who will not be pinned down. He drapes his work in gay imagery, but won't discuss his sexuality (this has led to accusations of 'queerbaiting': attracting gay fans under false pretences, as it were). The music website *Stereogum* once claimed that he had replaced Lana Del Rey as the most apolitical pop star in the world. Even the slogan on his merch – 'Respect Your Mother' from 'Dance No More' – speaks to both traditional values and progressive ones.

There's nothing wrong with any of this. Like many people, perhaps he doesn't care enough to want to put his name to bald statements. Or perhaps he simply doesn't want to risk annoying one group or another. Taylor Swift has shown that you can be a huge pop star and take risks – she's been unafraid to accept the consequences of what she says or does. And Styles isn't far short of Swift's cultural reach. But with Styles, it's hard to work out what he is, or whether he matters, or why he's so hugely popular.

You sense that he is aware of this slight vacancy. He's been very careful about doing Serious Artist things this year: mentioning cool references for his new album, curating the Southbank's Meltdown festival, putting on Kamasi Washington and Mulatu Astatke. And on stage, at points, he took to a keyboard rig and gave it the full Brian Eno, yanking knobs to distort the sound. The effect was slightly dulled by it continuing after he'd stopped twiddling. And if wanting to be Brian Eno is annoying, at least he doesn't want to be Roger Waters.

I like Harry Styles. But I'd like to be given a better reason to like him than just 'vibes'.

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Pamela Anderson (Mother) is torn apart by wolves in Rosebush Pruning

Cinema

Embarrassment of riches

Deborah Ross

Rosebush Pruning
18, Nationwide

Rosebush Pruning is one of those films where you'll say to yourself at the end: what the hell have I just seen? And not in a good way. It's about a wealthy family who are into fratricide, parricide, incest and blood. No quiet evenings playing Trivial Pursuit or charades for this lot. Mercifully, it is only 90 minutes long but, on the other hand, there are images you won't be able to scrub from your mind for a lifetime. Swings and roundabouts, my friends, swings and roundabouts.

Inexplicably, it has a knockout cast: Callum Turner, Jamie Bell, Tracy Letts, Pamela Anderson, Riley Keough, Elle Fanning, Lukas Gage. (You will want to pull each aside to ask: 'Why? Did you piss off your agent?') The family are preposterously rich Americans who have decamped to a magnificent hilltop villa in Spain. The father (Letts) is blind, while the mother (Anderson) was torn apart by wolves in the forest, supposedly. But they do have a naked, crouching statue of her in their courtyard to remember her by, which is touching. I do hope my family will do the same for me one day.

There are four kids: Jack (Bell) is the oldest and favoured son, while Edward (Turner) is obsessed with designer labels – he even dreams of Bottega loafers floating in the sky – and invents his own proverbs. What do we think of this one? 'People love roses. Rosebushes are family. Families need pruning.' Could do with some work I think. Their sister, Anna (Keough), wears baby blue go-go boots and comes on to the local butcher who, she swears, is excited by how he can sniff out her menstrual blood. But she is not in love with the local butcher. She is in love with Jack, as is the epileptic youngest son, Robert (Gage). Both do what they can to entice him sexually, while you're looking into your lap and praying for it all to be over.

When it comes to the eat-the-rich genre, this does make Saltburn look like child's play

To the extent that there is any plot it comes in the form of Jack, who plans to break away from the family, which they find an intolerable prospect. He has a girlfriend, Martha (Fanning), and wants to live with her. At lunch his siblings deride her fashion choices – Zara and Cos, ugh! – and describe her breasts to their father, as per his request. (They are 'average at best', says Anna.) Martha is not put off. Whatever world this is, she is part of it. Their father, meanwhile, has a nightly toothbrushing regime that turns sexual and which you won't be able to scrub from your mind during this lifetime or even the next. When it comes to the eat-the-rich genre, this does make *Saltburn* look like child's play.

The film is directed by Karim Ainouz, who made *Firebrand* (about Henry VIII and his stinky leg, you may remember), and has a screenplay by Efthimis Filippou (best known for his collaborations with Yorgos Lanthimos). It is loosely inspired by Marco Bellocchio's *Fists in the Pocket* (1965) but while that was a dark satire on the bourgeoisie and the Catholic church, if this had something to say, it completely passed me by. We never learn how these characters were formed, what it is they are seeking, or where any psychological truths might lie. And as events turn murderous – as the rosebush is pruned – it all seems as senseless as it is unearned. Add it all up and what you have is unpleasantness heaped on unpleasantness. I don't know what might save it. Perhaps if it were trimmed by 90 minutes or so?

Opera

A hundred shades of quiet sorrow

Richard Bratby

I puritani
Royal Opera House, until 19 July

Tristan und Isolde
Longborough Festival Opera, until 18 July

Vincenzo Bellini realised early on that as titles go, *Le teste rotonde ed i cavalieri* (*The Roundheads and the Cavaliers*) doesn't exactly trip off the tongue. He settled for *I puritani* instead, though he'd have been equally happy (or so he told friends) to name the whole opera after its lovestruck heroine Elvira. He admitted that the plot catches fire only after she loses her mind: the soprano who plays her has to be able to act, and she really has to be able to sing. 'In opera, it is the singing that moves one to tears, that causes horror, that inspires death,' as Bellini put it, and he practised what he preached.

So let's dispense with preliminaries and say upfront that the main reason to see the Royal Opera's new production of *I puritani* is Lisette Oropesa's performance as Elvira. Covent Garden adores Oropesa, and rightly. The poise and sensitivity of her stage presence is matched by a voice of supple, endlessly nuanced sweetness. She's a diva in the old, true sense, unrivalled in the way she balances a melody on its accompaniment, as well as the dewdrop freshness of her high notes and her ability to infuse a falling phrase with a hundred shades of quiet sorrow. At the Royal Opera, she's been the most seductive and queenly of Alcinas, and her Violetta Valéry made skylarks jealous.

As Elvira – a role that is almost one enormous mad scene – it's no great surprise that Oropesa walks away with the show. This wasn't a performance that provoked spontaneous ovations (though the audience went wild at the curtain call); rather, it pulled the atmosphere in around it, creating a halo of concentrated silence. And no one could accuse Oropesa of upstaging her colleagues, either, because Ildebrando d'Arcangelo (Giorgio) and Andrzej Filonczyk (Riccardo) were both formidable. In fact the only shaky link (on the first night, at least) was Francesco Demuro as Arturo. Plenty of lyricism and ardour there, for sure, but Demuro has a lean, narrow-bore tenor which sounded close to breaking by the final scenes. The conducting is propulsive and glows with colour; a formidable house debut for Riccardo Frizza.

Nonetheless, it's Oropesa who carries the night, with her tattered wedding dress and wilted bouquet. The more fragile her sound, the more compelling she becomes, though she's dazzlingly passionate and brilliant when she needs to be, supplying a luminosity that was badly needed in Richard Jones's drab new staging. Jones is usually a director of extremes: when he's good, he's extremely good and when he's bad he's maddening. Nothing had prepared me for a Jones production that was basically average – a passable semi-updating, with sets that resembled a BBC TV studio drama from the 1970s.

Still, with a cast like this, it did the job inoffensively enough. It was mostly OK, as long as you overlooked Jones's determination to flatten Bellini's complex and ambiguous Riccardo into a stock operatic villain. Why do directors do this – diminishing the artform, and pandering to its detractors? Jones's gratuitous final gesture cheapened the whole drama and drew deserved boos on a night of musical triumph.

Interestingly, when Longborough Festival Opera premièred Carmen Jakobi's production of *Tristan und Isolde* in 2015, its musical excellence was undermined by poor directorial decisions (one of them involved a simulated sex act between two dancers in body stockings). Miracle of miracles: reviews were read, lessons were learned and for the revival in 2017 Jakobi refocused it into an atmospheric and stunningly lit piece of scenic minimalism (Wieland Wagner with a hint of Zen), freeing the cast to deliver performances of volcanic intensity. With the great Anthony Negus in the pit, the result – in the confined space of LFO's 500-seat theatre – was described by Michael Tanner as 'one of the most exalting experiences I have had in the opera house'. And he'd seen a *Tristan* or two.

The main reason to see the Royal Opera's new production of I puritani is Lisette Oropesa's Elvira

The 2026 revival brings back Peter Wedd as a febrile, otherworldly Tristan, while Catharine Woodward, as Isolde, is his match both as enemy and lover. There was strength across the entire cast. Catherine Carby was an anguished Brangäne, Robert Hayward made a noble, heartbroken Kurwenal, and Alastair Miles released unexpected reserves of passion as King Marke. Wedd's vocal attack is increasingly stentorian and Act Three was almost unbearably harrowing until Woodward returned, sounding fresher and even more ecstatic than before – face and voice transfigured in a rare Liebestod that made perfect dramatic and musical sense.

But it was the whole conception that really gripped you; the feeling that words, images and Negus's soul-shaking conducting were all working upon each other to create the total and overwhelming drama that Wagner envisioned. LFO is famous for its *Ring* cycles but there's a reason why serious Wagnerites go starry-eyed when you mention their *Tristan*.

Podcasts

All American

Daisy Dunn

Tocqueville Road Trip
Apple, Spotify and other platforms

Mr Jefferson's Library
BBC Sounds

When Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in New York in 1831, he found a city a quarter of the size of Paris, perched on the lower tip of Manhattan, roamed by pigs. Speaking to everyone he met, high and low, he was struck by how many of the rich used to be poor. There was, he observed, an 'equality of conditions' that filtered down to the way parents treated their children.

The 25-year-old 'wiry aristocrat' filled 14 notebooks during his nine-month road trip across America to 17 of the 24 established states. It formed the basis of *Democracy in America*. 'The American inhabits a land where everything is constantly moving, and each movement seems to be progress,' he wrote. John Prideaux, former US editor of the *Economist*, takes the book with him as he retraces de Tocqueville's journey for a new six-part podcast. How much of what de Tocqueville observed still survives?

Prideaux eavesdrops on a pretty ghastly sounding soirée at the Lincoln Center, and makes his way to the lavish apartment of the philanthropists Barbara and the late Donald Tober. Here, the 'equality of conditions' feels rather elusive. Tober's block is guarded by a liveryman, and the lift opens directly into her home. The 91-year-old has commissioned a tomb for when she dies, 'a seven-foot-long wave of love', adorned with the Shield of Achilles, a pair of crossed skis, a violin and a horse. But she is also intent on spending most of her money on philanthropic causes before she dies. There may be little equality left in America in life, but in death, there is a kind of levelling.

Some of the most compelling insights in what proves to be a scintillating series come from Prideaux's visit to Sing Sing Correctional Facility. Surprised by how readily the prisoners own up to their crimes – it's been argued there's more accountability here than on Wall Street – Prideaux describes what he sees as the major difference between Americans and Europeans. The former are much less likely to believe that they end up where they do because of luck. And so, if they commit a crime, they accept they must be punished for poor choices. Europeans are less punitive, as de Tocqueville also recognised, because of their feudal origins; the belief is instilled in them that some people are simply more likely to come unstuck owing to the social hierarchy.

Tocqueville Road Trip is quite the jour-

ney, and Prideaux is a first-class guide. If America was 'a spectacle for which the history of the past had not prepared it', it remains a spectacle for which the future is equally ill prepared.

In *Mr Jefferson's Library* on BBC Sounds, American journalist Michael Goldfarb begins where John Prideaux ends, in Washington DC. For his five-part miniseries, he is investigating the reading habits that informed Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration* and approach to the American revolution more widely.

The first 6,000 books that formed the primary collection of the Library of Congress came from Jefferson's own library. Finding himself in debt, the founding father sold his books for a pretty dollar, while retaining some old favourites; Goldfarb finds copies of Herodotus's *Histories* and *Don Quixote* in Jefferson's former home at Monticello.

It would appear that Jefferson had copied out much of what he sold. His commonplace books burst with passages on everything from ancient circumcision to the battle of Hastings and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*. The last of these, says Goldfarb, is the most heavily annotated in Jefferson's commonplace legal book. If this is the sort of detail that intrigues you, there's a lot more where that came from in this series, which suffers for being too dense for the format.

Each 14-minute episode has material to fill a slot at least twice as long. I struggled to keep pace with what was being said while Goldfarb delivered his script. This is a pity, because there were evidently rich insights on the influence of Sir Francis Bacon's empiricism, among much else. When the narrative did slow, and Goldfarb discussed the injection of religion into today's politics 'in a pre-Enlightenment way' as the antithesis of Jefferson's dream, I found something to digest.

Television

What Katie did next

James Walton

Katie Price: Nothing to Hide
Sky Documentaries

Elle
Amazon Prime

These days, the 1990s seem to be regarded – especially by people too young to remember them – as a prelapsarian idyll. In Britain, London swung again to the sound of Britpop. In America, good-looking twentysomethings lived cheaply in large apartments, wisecracking and hugging their way through solvable problems. And all without the tyranny of social media.

A rather less rosy picture, though, emerged in the opening episode of the four-part *Katie Price: Nothing to Hide*, in which Price added to her nine autobiographies and numerous documentaries and/or reality shows by deciding to 'reflect on my life' for the first time. The result was both a revealing social history and not unlike a novel by Martin Amis at his most blackly comic.

In Price's defence, there's plenty to reflect on. Eager for fame from her early teens, she soon realised that attracting male attention was the key to getting it. Luckily, this was something she loved doing, beginning with looking hot in Brighton clubs. Her big break – those Gen-Z fans of the 1990s might find hard to believe – was appearing topless at 18 in a national newspaper that sold millions of copies a day. 'The excitement was ridiculous,' said Price; but, in what became something of a mantra, 'I wanted more.'

The 'more' in question duly included trading in her local boyfriend, a mere celebrated face around Brighton, for a pop star: Dane Bowers from the aptly named Another Level. It also included bigger breasts. In fact, when *Sun* readers were invited to vote on whether she should get them ('My boobs are in your hands'), 80 per cent thought she should stay with her 'natural born thrillers'. But she went for them anyway, the only problem being that they didn't look unnatural enough – so she upgraded to ones that were unmistakably 'stuck on'.

Sadly, however, Dane wasn't keen on other men ogling her and so issued a cruel ultimatum – either she wore more clothes in photographs or he'd leave. Much to her shame now, she initially chose the more-clothes option. ('When I've been in love, I've been blind,' she lamented.) But after a while she cracked and put out an unambiguously sexy calendar. At which point, Dane, who also appeared in the programme, proved as good as his word.

After he departed, Price took 'a load of pills' – much to his annoyance. Feeling obliged to visit her in hospital, he found her unconscious with a picture of him on her chest and, by his own account, thought, 'She's taking the piss.' Then again, as she acknowledged in her usual unblushing way, she kind of was: 'I didn't want to kill myself. I just wanted him to want me back.' Once this plan failed, she consoled herself with another boob job and a new footballer boyf.

But even this is just scraping the surface of what Price described at the start as the 'ten fun years' she enjoyed before her life turned 'turbulent' – as we'll no doubt hear in succeeding episodes. (You have been warned.)

Nonetheless, perhaps the strangest thing of all is that Price is undeniably engaging company, looking back on everything with a winning blend of disbelief, ruefulness and amusement. Granted, you couldn't help thinking that the makers of *Nothing to Hide* – along with her plastic surgeons – should have tried harder to protect her from herself. (They might, for example, have decided there were some things to hide.) On the other hand, good luck with that.

In *Elle*, normal 1990s service – i.e. essential niceness – is resumed. A prequel to the film *Legally Blonde*, the series opened in 1995 with Elle Woods (Lexi Minetree) celebrating her 16th birthday at her parents' huge mansion in LA. But then disaster struck. Her plastic-surgeon father botched a celebrity's nose job, and the family was forced to leave town and move to a huge mansion in Seattle. In an eerily similar fish-out-of-water plot to that of the film, Elle therefore brought her sunny Californian ways – and wide array of pink outfits – to a rainy city where the other kids were into grunge and cynicism.

And from there, you can probably guess the rest. Sure enough, a mean girl with a sycophantic henchwoman sneered at her a lot (but will presumably be won over). Her various attempts to make her scowling classmates like her backfired spectacularly (but will presumably work in the end). And, above all of course, nothing could crush Elle's spirit.

The three episodes I've seen so far did contain a sprinkling of moderately funny lines and Minetree, straightforwardly channelling Reese Witherspoon from the movie, makes for an appealing heroine. Even so, the niceness increasingly curdles into the bland – and the whole thing feels badly underpowered, as if the motto in the writers' room must have read: 'Sod it, that'll do.'

Theatre

The royal treatment

Lloyd Evans

Springwood
Hampstead Theatre, until 25 July

Monarchs Anonymous
The Other Palace Studio

The Truth
Apollo Theatre, until 12 September

Springwood, set in June 1939, looks at a series of tricky meetings between the American president FDR and George VI at the Roosevelts' family retreat in upstate New York. George and Queen Elizabeth are guests at the poky old house and although they complain to each other about their sleeping quarters they hide their dismay from their hosts. The writer-director, Richard Nelson, evidently despises the main characters apart from

MANUEL HARLAN

Robert Lindsay (Franklin) and Andrew Havill (George VI) and company in Springwood

FDR (Robert Lindsay) who comes across as a genial old buffer addicted to whisky.

The dialogue is divided into easy-to-handle segments. First, we get the history bit. FDR tells George that the US ought to join Britain in the coming war but pro-German sentiment is very strong and the majority of Americans may support Hitler. Then we get the therapy bit. George confesses that his tyrannical and heartless father turned him into a spineless quivering ninny who craves the approval of everyone he meets.

Within the context of the play, this makes sense. George (Andrew Havill) appears to be a brainless dolt who gets into a panic about eating sausages in public even though his heritage is German. He allows a minor English diplomat, Cameron, to wander around the royal bedroom wearing a bathrobe and chatting to the King and Queen as if they were shipmates on a boating holiday. When the Queen speaks to Princess Elizabeth over the phone, Cameron takes a seat and listens to their private conversation. And George keeps a whisky bottle hidden in his briefcase like a guilty parson. He happens to be the emperor of India.

Elizabeth (Rebecca Night) is portrayed as a stuffy crosspatch with no sense of fun or warmth. Jemma Redgrave's Eleanor Roosevelt has similar faults. She's aloof, snobbish and quick to criticise those around her. She eventually bonds with the prickly Elizabeth who confesses that she didn't wish to marry her husband. 'And I certainly didn't want to be Queen.' It's not clear why Elizabeth shares this juicy detail with the First Lady whom she barely knows. Perhaps she's unaware that Eleanor writes a daily syndicated newspaper column.

In the second act, the royal couple learn that FDR keeps a mistress and that Eleanor is a closet lesbian. Their horrified reaction to these humdrum secrets gives the impression that the royals are unfamiliar with womanising and homosexuality. The play succeeds in conjuring up the awkward tedium of a lifeless weekend in the countryside but it's quite an ordeal, very short of rewards, apart from Tom Piper's attractive costumes. The main characters feel like suburban lightweights rather than global leaders who command armies and empires. The company of ten includes six actors who contribute nothing to the drama. Quite a waste of talent.

Monarchs Anonymous is set in a mental-health workshop where kings and queens share their emotional problems. A great idea. Confessional speeches are inherently dramatic and the monarchs are likely to reveal fascinating snippets about their lives during the therapy sessions. But the script depicts the characters as shallow, prattling figures of fun. Henry VIII is a mulish psychopath. Charles II flounces all over the stage, boasting about his sexual exploits. Marie Antoinette delivers drunken speeches on behalf of the peasantry whom she claims to adore. A Sikh princess, Sophia Duleep Singh, speaks in a piercing voice about her support for women's rights.

The show contains no historical insights and the characters spend their time bickering and carping while the harassed therapist tries to keep order. Who is this for? Children would find it tiresome. So would teachers and parents. The message is that the dominant cult of mental health is a wonderful thing for us all, and that even anointed monarchs must bow to the therapist's will.

The Truth by Florian Zeller is a good old-fashioned sex comedy that delivers a fistful of brilliant surprises. Michel is enjoying a casual affair with Alice who happens to be the wife of his best friend, Paul. Michel insists that Alice keep their romance a secret but as the story develops his plan backfires and he falls victim to a set of cunning ambushes laid by Paul and the other characters.

The plot is a miracle of precision engineering. Stephen Mangan is terrific as the narcissistic hypocrite at the centre of the story and he persuades us to like him rather than to find his self-deceit and disloyalty unappealing. Ardal O'Hanlon does a great turn as the sly and debonair Paul who knows more than he admits.

Directed by Lindsay Posner, the show has an abundance of charm, fluency and lightness. Lizzie Clachan's interiors beautifully represent the stylish homes of the upper middle-class characters. And her costumes are beyond sensational. Sarah Hadland (Alice) and Janie Dee (as Michel's wife) may never again wear such beautiful outfits. Designers should treat this show as a masterclass.

NOTES ON...

Tans

By *Christa D'Souza*

The cult economist Adam Tooze generally discusses matters far beyond my understanding on his podcast *Ones and Tooze*. While roasting in my flat over the heatwave, however, I found myself gripped by a segment he did on the economics of beach recreation. Did you know that 50 per cent of Americans going on holiday regard getting a tan as more important than the actual holiday?

This correlates with the rise of the 'tanfluencer' and 'tanmaxxing' among Gen Z and the revival of the full-on, George Hamilton-style tan. As a bit of an old tanorexic myself (remember, fellow boomers, the smell of Bergasol?), I'm quietly thrilled. First, because if this is a competition I will almost certainly win it (spot the brownest white person in the room: that's me!). Second, because what is the point of a summer holiday if you don't have something to show for it afterwards? Though historically the British are terrible at tanning, we're just as obsessed as Americans about having one. We invented *Love Island*, after all.

Was it Wallis Simpson or Coco Chanel who said, 'You can never be too rich, too thin or too tanned'? Whatever. Melanoma cases may be higher than they have ever been in this country (rising to more than 20,000 new cases annually, according to the latest Cancer Research figures), but the vicious tan appears to be back big time.

Have you come across the practice of perineum tanning? You read that right. Perineum tanning (or 'butthole sunning' as it is sometimes referred to) is a TikTok wellness trend, initially promoted in conservative US circles but fast making its way over here. Supposedly it balances hormone levels, encourages the absorption of Vitamin D and may even raise testosterone levels. Is wacky RFK Jr, the US Secretary of Health, into it? I caught a glimpse of him the other day on CNN and was struck by the intensity of his tan, and how much he looked as though someone had shoved his head up a chimney.

What are the politics of a tan? It signifies that you're a jetsetter, of course, but that's not a trait voters necessarily admire in their leaders. Was it Tony Blair's perma-tan, rather than the Iraq War, which was to blame for his unpopularity when he finally left office?

Some British politicians can get away with a tan. It suits, say, Rupert Lowe, head of Restore Britain, to rock one. Ditto Nigel Farage (although one can never quite tell if that's drink or the sun). Andy Burnham had a noticeable tan during his Makerfield campaign and it certainly didn't dent his popularity there. A tan can signal vigour and vitality, but it can also be a bit *Salut, Les Pauvres*. The politics of envy have always been such a thing in this country, but maybe that is changing.

Here, inevitably, I must return to the United States. No one has loaded the tan with so much geopolitical meaning as Donald Trump. To my mind there is something vaguely apocalyptic about the particular shade of spray tan he favours. The more orange he gets, the scarier the world seems. But then maybe this is what this devil-may-care approach to tanning is all about. Skin cancer be damned. Live now for tomorrow you may die. I need someone like Tooze to tackle the subject.

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'It's all very well for you to be rebuilding your self-esteem, but there's an unsavoury Hugh Hefner, dehumanising vibe about juggling four love interests.'
***Dear Mary,* p59**

LIFE

Best life
Rachel Johnson

My beef with the columnist Bruce Anderson began, as beefs do, at the *Spectator* summer party. Not this year's – we will come to that – but at another brilliant edition of the annual gold-plater some years ago.

On that occasion, after arrival I'd gone to my usual peg outdoors by the stairs up into the garden, a liminal position from where I can bag the famous and important and am unlikely to be bed-blocked by bores.

Bruce, aka 'Brute Anderson' – a baggy, shaggy bruiser of whom P.G. Wodehouse would doubtless have written that he looked as though he had been poured into his clothes and had forgotten to say 'when' –

A bit crook and half-cut, he loomed over me like the leaning tower of Pisa made man

loomed. 'Lassie,' the Scot boomed. I mounted a step to be closer to him in height. A bit crook and half-cut, he still loomed over me like the leaning tower of Pisa made man. 'Lassie, you need to shave!'

I would like to stress at this point that this was not only uncalled-for but it was also incorrect. As far as I'm concerned, any facial fluff or down I may sport is fine and baby-blond and therefore quite invisible to the naked eye. I will not be taking questions on this matter.

I gave Brute, whose blotchy countenance was sprouting a wild bed of straggly whiskers and copious nasal hair, a nasty look. 'How dare you,' I snapped. I wasn't quite sure what to say next. I didn't know how to convey the extent of his grievous miscalculation. My younger brother Jo was standing next to Brute and knew this was bad.

'What do you want me to do, Rake?' Jo asked. He was a bit pale. I think he was a government minister at the time. We stood there as people pushed past us to find prime ministers, party leaders, members of the cabinet, national newspaper editors, our brother, Joan Collins, Piers Morgan, etc. 'Do you want me to hit him?'

Fast forward to the *Spectator* party last week at the height of this golden, sun-soaked summer of 2026. Brute was there, even more beardy and bulky, when I arrived, and there he stayed, as I circulated asking guests how long they'd been coming to the *Speccie* party. I had to hand my flute of Pol Roger for them to hold as I made notes of their answers on my iPhone.

This reporting technique has not stood the test of time. I've been examining my notes, and one entry reads: 'Joanna Coles was the *Spec*'s business manager. My only job was to mend the blinds in Doughty St.'

I have no idea who told me this.

Anyway, the BBC's Amol Rajan told me he'd been coming for five years, i.e. he started under Fraser Nelson's editorship. The *Mail*'s Quentin Letts told me he'd been coming since Charles Moore took over (me too – I first gate-crashed as a pushy fresher in the 1980s). Quentin had the traditional entrée to the event: he'd come when a young pup on the Peterborough column (the party remains a gobbet-generating machine). He said he'd watched in admiration as the *Spectator*'s circulation manager became so drunk he chatted up a female statue, and then a brawl broke out. 'I think Bruce Anderson was involved,' Letts recalled happily, as last week's party, the best of Westminster and Fleet Street, roared on around us. 'That's when I thought, this is my world. I decided to become a journalist.' London's new hot couple, Kate Garraway and Liam Halligan, were glowing. It was their first time at the party together, and that's what mattered. They were happy as newlyweds.

Sir Keir's Ginger Ninja was also there. I forgot to ask Morgan McSweeney whether it was his first time. Damn. But I did ask him whether he wasn't a bit 'fish out of water' in this right-wing throng, where Restore's Rupert Lowe seemed to have bumped Nigel Farage from the winners' enclosure.

McSweeney looked stunned by the ploddingness of my observation. I followed up with another predictable question – you can guess – to which he replied, 'I've retired.'

And then the miracle of Old Queen St. I saw Bruce under an arbour as I was making my way to the caviar and blini bar, and found myself approaching to pop the question. Side note: after decades of the party being strictly nil-by-mouth – apart from champagne – Michael Gove has introduced solids in the shape of these very welcome 'fishy nibbles'. I didn't pile into the élite canapés or Pol Roger much, though, as I was on best behaviour. Two of my editors, Ben Taylor of the *Sunday Times* and Chris Evans of the *Telegraph*, were there, plus the *Tel*'s new proprietor, Mathias Döpfner, and of course Michael Gove of this parish, whose peg is where it should be: at the top of the stairs.

Back to Bruce. 'Fifty years,' he replied. 'Since Alexander Chancellor.' We inspected each other's facial hair for old times' sake. 'Even though I enjoyed being angry with you, you're forgiven,' I told him, amazed I had nursed my grievance for so long, as I tend to forget whom I'm supposed to be cross with, and why, within minutes. 'And I enjoyed being angry with you, monkey,' he replied.

Real life
Melissa Kite

The couple who were on a climate crisis camping trip in Ballydehob messaged me in a desperate state.

'We're cold and wet! Please can we come?' It was after 7 p.m. and she had asked for a two-night stay, specifying she would be bringing a dog. We do allow dogs, but we make clear that we can only take small ones because we have to maintain some sort of non-dog smell to the rooms.

Added to which, people who take their dogs with them everywhere are the worst. They think they are interesting but they are, in fact, colossally boring.

I have never met one dog-traveller who is anything other than a pain in the proverbial. We once took our little spaniel Cydney to France and once was enough. We learned with that one trip that travelling with your dog is asking too much of people, and so, as we're not egomaniacs, we stopped doing it.

'Do you take pets?' said this woman who was attempting to camp in Ballydehob, mecca of the left, when she first messaged me on the booking system. I had agreed to take her last minute because she was wet and cold in her environmental teepee, doing her dance and climate action workshop.

Yes, that's right, come to the home of the right-wing Trump supporters with oil-fired heating for a few nights of hot water when your pro-Palestine dance and movement workshop has worn you down, after probably one night.

But to specify she wanted to bring 'pets' was too much.

'What sort of pet?' I asked, for I really did not like the generalisation. Was she going to bring a ferret, or a companion llama, which she travelled with for emotional support for her various made-up afflictions? She did not reply for an hour, so it was gone 8 p.m. by the time I learned that it was a dog.

No specificity as to size. 'What sort of dog is it please?' Another hour passed, and I could only imagine she was looking for alternative accommodation where the host did not ask such impertinent questions about her fur baby.

But after another hour she replied: 'It's an old labrador, very well behaved. She is very tired and won't run around.'

I could have said that very old labrador is nice, but very old labrador smells, and I have a responsibility to my next guests in that room, which has carpet.

But it was now very late, and I felt sorry for the dog, for my heart aches for the dogs of lefties and other idiots who take dogs everywhere. Fancy being dragged to a climate crisis love-in on a campsite in Ballydehob. One can only imagine the horrors this labrador had witnessed.

So I said yes, and she then took another hour to reply, before announcing they were on their way.

One last thing she then messaged: 'We'll need a bathtub.' No, I said, you have a shower in that en suite. Do you mean you want to bath the dog? Because you'll have to use the downstairs dog wash. No reply.

I felt sorry for the dog, for my heart aches for the dogs of lefties and other idiots who take dogs everywhere

At 10 p.m., they drove through the gate. They got out of the car with a limping black lab and they all hobbled towards the house, she silver-haired, he tall and bent over with the effects of dirty leftie glamping.

They came in, refusing to smile at me and without a word of thanks for the late admittance, or the taking of a dog. They had to push the dog up the stairs, by shoving on its backside as it floundered. I showed them to their room and went to find a dog water bowl. No thank you for that.

They shut their door and a few minutes later I heard the hot water system roaring as the showering began. He went out later to walk the dog and left the front door wide open all night.

The next morning they came down at eight, and as they eyed the breakfast buffet I offered them food for the labrador.

They said she might enjoy some 'wet food'. I bet she would, I thought, for she had probably been managing with vegan dog biscuits, a kind of cruelty that should lead to someone having their dog taken into care.

I got the lab a nice big bowl of dog meat and she wolfed it down gratefully.

Then the woman announced that she – as in the woman – only ate gluten-free bread. 'Don't have any, sorry. You arrived late. No time for me to get speciality items.' She eyed the milk. 'No oat milk,' I said.

When I cleared their bowls, I noticed she had put orange juice on her granola. Get a grip of yourself, I wanted to say, but didn't.

They then left without a word of thanks, revealing they had booked only one night. Inside their room, I stripped the bed, which was covered in dog hair. The floor was strewn with vegan kibble.

But nothing prepared me for what was in the bedroom wastepaper bin. A bag of dog poo. A tightly tied plastic bag of poo in the bedroom bin. Talk about stupidity and ego. I really do not want to give these dog-travellers another inch.

Dolce Vita

Nicholas Farrell

Dante's Beach, Ravenna

In an attempt to avoid the infernal heat and the rhythmic maracas-style racket of the cicadas in the trees, I have become nocturnal. I go to bed at 7 a.m. and get up at 4 p.m.

This may seem wrong, a sign of moral failure or mental breakdown, but let me remind you that the wise men bearing gifts did the same. As Longfellow writes: 'And they travelled by night and they slept by day,/ For their guide was a beautiful, wonderful star.'

It is that moment in the night before the cock-crow hour, and the silence is more or less total, apart from the stirrings of the sea a mile or so across the fields. I sit at my work station looking out from the wide-open window of my so-called study at the star-spangled sky above me and the lights of the gas rig known as Angiolina on the horizon.

I lower my gaze to the glass of red wine next to my laptop and notice a beautiful green grasshopper has attached itself to the rim. I gently prise the grasshopper off with a forefinger and thumb and toss it out of the window. Then I take a swig of the wine: Chianti Superiore from Lidl at €3.99 a bottle. I am allowed to drink during the World Cup and am making the most of it like a demobbed soldier.

In my last column I discussed the old Italian conspiracy theory that Winston Churchill wrote deeply compromising letters to Benito Mussolini before and during the second world war. I feel I must return to the issue, not least because a reader wrote in the comment section that at long last I had written something interesting, but also for the sake of fair play.

I am allowed to drink during the World Cup and am making the most of it like a demobbed soldier

What had prompted me to write about 'the Mussolini-Churchill correspondence', as it is called in Italy, was a recent three-hour documentary broadcast by the Italian equivalent of the BBC, which accused Churchill (more or less) of ordering the execution of Mussolini and his mistress after their capture by partisans on Lake Como in April 1945 en route for Switzerland. Churchill's motive? To stop the Duce making the letters public.

Italy's top TV political talk-show host Bruno Vespa, who also writes popular history books, was wheeled out to state categorically that the letters exist. Plenty of forged letters have come to light but no genuine ones, apart from Churchill's entreaty of May 1940, urging Mussolini not to enter the war, and the Duce's dismissive reply. But it's not just Vespa – even Italy's greatest historian of the fascist period, Renzo De Felice, author of an eight-volume biography of Mussolini, believed the fantasy, though he was never able to produce any proper evidence before he died in 1996.

There is, however, one character in this classic Italian conspiracy tale whom I did not mention but who does lend it a certain credibility: Malcolm Smith. It is said that in the summer of 1945 Churchill sent this '007 inglese', as the Italians call him, to Lake Como to retrieve his letters from a villa and hand them to Churchill when he arrived in September for a painting holiday.

The first Italian to mention Malcolm Smith was Duilio Susmel, in a 1967 article which contained extracts from a set of fake Churchill-Mussolini letters. Susmel wrote that the source who had told him about Smith was 'Signor X' who was 'very close' to Smith.

Right, well here's the thing. Major Malcolm Smith really did exist and was a member not of the 'Field Security Service', as Susmel claimed (though he meant Field

Security Section), but was actually commanding officer, codename ‘Trusty’, of the No. 3 Special Counter Intelligence Unit run by MI6. I found this out via Rupert Allason, the former Tory MP, spy writer and old friend whom I address as Mountain Climber. He calls me Dogwalker and put me on to a secret services chat site and they told me. They also said that Smith was indeed in Milan and Como until September 1945, when he went to Rome.

Smith was born in Palermo in 1910 and lived before the war much of his adult life in South Africa. He remained in Italy after the war in Milan, where he was honorary South African consul and died in 1991, I believe in Brianza, near Como. An Italian historian, interviewed at length in the documentary to say that ‘of course’ the letters exist, claims to have been to Smith’s former house there, where he found ‘sensational’ documents. But he refuses to say where it is or what they say – or speak to me unless paid.

The key to all this lies, I feel, with Smith’s wife, Elda Ribetti, who was a famous soprano from Florence. She was the daughter of a ‘*fascistissimo*’ Italian infantry colonel and died in 2003. But there is hardly any info about her private life online.

How did Smith end up with her? And did they have children? We must find out. So I emailed another friend, the equally well-known soprano Wilma Vernocchi, whom I have not seen for some years. She replied swiftly: ‘You write to me about an incredibly interesting argument… I have mobilised my sister-in-law in Prato whom I call “007”.’

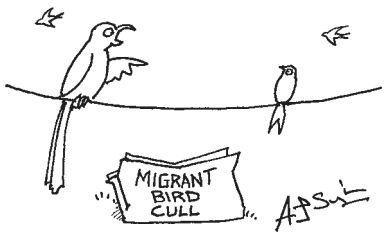
For the Italians, despite their passion for *la bella figura*, the truth is never what you see but what you do not see that lurks *dietro le quinte* (behind the choir stalls).

The Turf

Charlie Brooks

You might remember that I mentioned His Excellency Mansoor Abulhoul, the United Arab Emirates ambassador to the UK, a couple of weeks ago. I was so blown away by his assessment of horse racing in this country, and the potential it has to build lucrative and cultural relationships around the world, that I gallivanted up to London to drop in on him at the UAE embassy.

I was in bad shape. Prior to my visit, I had a gazillion red blood cells injected into a torn tendon in my elbow. OMG. I’ve never been stabbed but I think I now have a pretty good idea what it must feel like. The slightest movement was sending excruciating pains



‘It won’t affect me – I was born here.’

up my arm, causing me to screw my face up and make noises like ‘yaieeeee’. I fear I may have alarmed the ambassador as we chatted over coffee in a beautifully cool reception room. Big chairs, leather-bound works of British poets lining the walls.

His Excellency learned to ride at the Dubai riding club when he was five, and horses got into his blood. Horse racing is a worldwide community that always welcomes boyish enthusiasm. The young Mansoor Abulhoul ended up doing a year of ‘hard yakka’ at a pre-training yard near Newmarket before spending a season with the genius but explosive trainer David Elsworth, who called him Victor for the duration of his apprenticeship. We can safely assume that the ambassador is a grafter who can take a rollicking. When he got back to Dubai he realised he didn’t have a proper plan to be a trainer, so he joined his family’s retail business.

But all that mucking out hadn’t been wasted. He met a French filly on the racecourse with a black-type pedigree, and a racecourse romance became a marriage made in Meydan.

Victoria Devin is racing royalty in France. Her great-grandmother, Elisabeth Couturié, owned the 1961 King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes winner Right Royal, and her family still owns and operates the phenomenal Haras De Mesnil stud near Le Mans where Doctor Dino, Telecaster and Bay Bridge are stallions.

It’s a small world. As we spoke, a three-year-old gelding by trainer Willie Mullins’s go-to stallion Doctor Dino was making €225,000 in the ring in Ireland.

Even if his wife’s heart no doubt rests in France, the ambassador is an incredible advocate for British racing: ‘The convening power of British racing has this “wow factor”. This is where it all began and events like Royal Ascot have a huge diplomatic engagement. You just can’t underestimate the power that British racing has.’ And it isn’t long before we’re speculating when the champion five-year-old Ombudsman will lock horns with the best three-year-old this year, Constitution River, who won the Coral Eclipse at Sandown last weekend.

He is way too diplomatic to criticise our country in any way, but he reminds me of the leverage Dubai has created over the past 30 years, attracting people from around the globe to the Dubai World Cup.

The ambassador’s eyes really lit up, though, when he talked about one of the smaller emirates, Umm Al Quwain, where he used to ride in pony shows when he was younger. In fact he is passionate about all the emirates. ‘Ras Al Khaimah joined the union in 1972, and they have some big projects coming along. It’s a very prominent emirate. Fujairah in the east is also now very important with its access to the Indian Ocean.

‘The UAE always had resilience and preparedness in the front of its mind, but being able to form a land bridge between Abu Dhabi and Fujairah has been important. So a lot of cargo is moving through Fujairah’s ports. I think their future will be very prosperous and more important to us. The pipeline from Abu Dhabi to their ports has carried 180,000 barrels of oil a day, but that will increase.’

Sharjah is the third largest emirate. Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, its ruler, is a graduate of Exeter university. The resulting reciprocal relationship is another reminder that close links with the Middle East are so important.

‘Dubai has secured itself through aviation, lifestyle and its financial sector,’

The UAE ambassador learned to ride at the Dubai riding club when he was five, and horses got into his blood

the ambassador told me. ‘It was driven by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who is an inventor, a creator. He wanted 110 per cent all the time. He had this huge fire in his belly and he got things done.’

Nevertheless, Abu Dhabi is very much the capital. ‘It feels like Washington. It’s where the federal government is housed, it had the natural resources, the strategic military capability and the relationships around the world. But Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who ruled Abu Dhabi from 1966, knew they had to work together and understood the prominence of Dubai.’

The unity of the seven emirates is so striking, in contrast to our dis-United Kingdom. And we disrespect our attributes. I felt quite angry as I walked away from the embassy down Grosvenor Crescent. We have Wimbledon, Ascot, Lord’s, Cheltenham and the Premier League, and we once had unique countryside sports loved by people from countries which don’t have such treasures.

But instead of supporting those endeavours, which incidentally bring in billions of pounds of investment, hundreds of thousands of pounds in taxation and tens of thousands of jobs, successive governments have done sod all to leverage the soft power that they bestow on our country.

There is no one in government who could hold a candle to the UAE ambassador when it comes to understanding how we should use our assets. Not even the bloke in the black T-shirt who will be toast by Christmas.

Chess

Super Rapid and Blitz

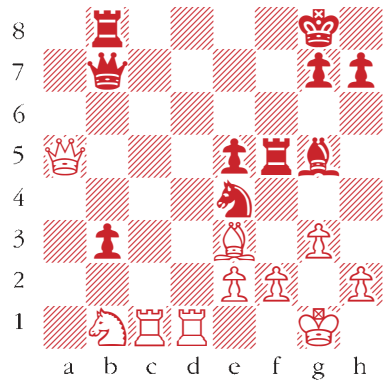
Luke McShane

Alireza Firouzja jokingly described the final day of the Super Rapid and Blitz, held in Croatia earlier this month, as the 'worst of his life' – and yet somehow he won the tournament anyway. The rapid event was held over the first three days, which left Firouzja and Praggnanandhaa in joint first place, and an impressive game from the latter is shown below. Firouzja followed that up with a crushing 8/9 score on the first day of blitz chess, building up a lead which looked unassailable. But his feeble start of 2/7 on the final day put the tournament win in jeopardy. He scraped into the tiebreaks thanks to a dramatic turnaround in the penultimate round against Gukesh (below), and went on to win a tense 'armageddon' game against Abdusattorov which decided the event.

Anish Giri-Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa
Super Rapid, Croatia, July 2026

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 Nf3 Nf6 4 g3 Be7 5 Bg2 O-O 6 O-O c6 7 Qc2 b6 8 Rd1 Nbd7 9 Bf4 Nh5 10 Bc1 Nhf6 11 b3 Bb7 12 Nc3 Ba6 13 Bb2 dxc4 14 bxc4 Bxc4 15 Nd2 Ba6 16 Bxc6 Rc8 17 Bf3 b5 18 a3 Qb6 19 Qb3 Rb8 20 Nde4 Nxe4 21 Bxe4 Bb7 22 Bxb7 Qxb7 23 d5 Nc5 24 Qa2 a5 25 dxe6 fxe6! Well judged. Preventing 25…Nxe6 26 Nd5! takes precedence over weakening the pawns. **26 Rac1**

Diag 1: Black to play, position after 33 Qe1-a5

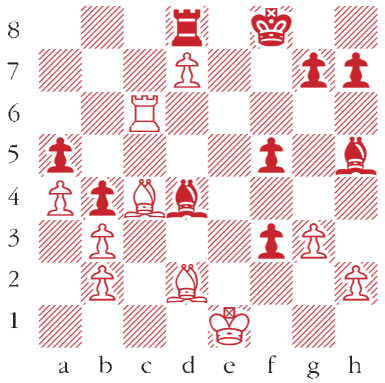


b4 27 axb4 axb4 28 Nb1 b3 29 Qa5 Rf5! Forceful play. The queen gets no respite. **30 Qe1 Ne4 31 Bd4 e5 32 Be3 Bg5! 33 Qa5** (see diagram 1). Allowing a stylish finish, but 33 Bxg5 was no better, e.g. 33…Nxg5 34 f3 Rxf3! wins. **33...Nxf2!! 34 Bxf2 Rxf2 White resigns**, since 35 Kxf2 Rf8+ is followed by Bg5-e3# or Qb7-h1#

Gukesh has outplayed Firouzja up to this point, but faced a confusing choice with less than 20 seconds on his clock. Perhaps the simplest was 35 Rd6! Then 35…Bxb2 36 Bg5 wins cleanly, or 35…Bf6 36 Bb5! keeps control, and the Bd2 can move towards b6 or c7.

Dommaraju Gukesh-Alireza Firouzja
Super Blitz, Croatia, July 2026

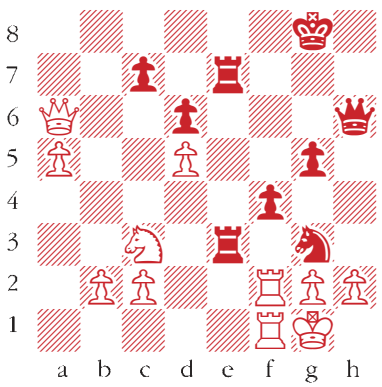
Diag 2: White to play, position after 34...Ra8-d8



35 Bg5? Tempting, but Firouzja can now escape. **f2+ 36 Kf1 Bg4!** The threat of Bg4-h3+ wins time **37 Kg2 f4!** A clever follow up, since after 38 Bxd8 f3+ 39 Kh1 Bh3 White cannot prevent mate. **38 gxf4 Bxd7** Just in time! **39 Ra6?** Firouzja's resourceful play will now earn the full point. Instead 39 Rc7 Ke8 40 Bxd8 Kxd8 41 Rxd7+ (not 41 Rb7 Bc6+) Kxd7 and the endgame is drawn. **Rc8 40 Rd6 Rxc4 White resigns** in view of 41 Rxd7 Rc1 or 41 bxc4 Bh3+.

PUZZLE NO. 907

Black to play. A variation from Saric-Keymer, Super Rapid, Croatia, July 2026. Saric avoided this position, but still lost the game. Which move would crown Keymer's attack on the kingside? Email answers to **chess@spectator.co.uk** by Monday 13 July. There is a prize of a £20 John Lewis voucher for the first correct answer out of a hat.



Last week's solution 1…Qxf3! resigns, e.g. 2 gxf3 Bxf3+ 3 Rg2 Bxg2+ 4 Kg1 Bf3+ and wins, or 2 Rdd2 Ne3 3 Qg1 Nxg2 4 Rxg2 Qxf4 with an easy win.
Last week's winner Keith Williams, Kings Worthy, Hants

Competition

Elemental

Lucy Vickery

For Competition 3457 you were invited to submit a weather forecast in verse.

There were nods to Shakespeare, Eliot, Hardy and MacNeice in a large, varied and accomplished entry. An honourable mention goes to John O'Byrne's haiku:

Mother Nature cries
Stopping play at Wimbledon:
Not any one's fault.

The entries printed below net their authors a £25 John Lewis voucher.

It's no go the beach today, it's no go the picnic:
There's heavy rain from Kent to Wales and thunder
storms in Whitwick.
You'll need cagoules in Chichester and wellingtons
in Dover
And Driza-Bones in Liverpool till this tornado's
over.

It's no go the summer fete, it's no go the barbie,
All you'll get is the tea-tent drowned and a flood
alert for Derby.
The M1's disappeared in spray, brown fog is on the
Mersey
And if you venture north of the Tyne you'll need
your thickest jersey.

It's no go your social life, there's nothing left to
hope for.
All you have's this blue-lit screen and a mobile
phone to grope for,
The real world is washed away, the climate's
changed for ever
And no escaping this bare fact: we're all in this
together.
D.A. Prince

The forecast bodes more wind and rain,
Ay, wind and rain,
Where under leaden skies again
The frenzied stormbirds fly;
More drenching downpours lie in wait
With gloomy days as grey as slate
While folk abed bid fears abate,
Becalmed by 'Sailing By.'

Yet, facing days more foul than fair,
More foul than fair,
We, armed with Hardy hearts, must bear
A spell devoid of cheer;
For long-term forecasts now suggest,
With pressure lowering in the West,
There's little hope of being blessed
With days less dour and drear.
Alan Millard

In comforting, patrician tones
I shall predict the weather.
And folk will feel much less alone
Believing we, together,
Face futures of occluded skies
Or stark, cloudless forever.

My forecast is approximate,
There's much margin for error
In maps and charts I shall create

But don't determine whether
The doldrum or the storm prevails:
I'm smug in my endeavour.

Folk heed or not my forecasting
The weather does not follow.
The only truth in broadcasting?
I'll try again tomorrow.
Adrian Fry

They'll be blue skies over Dover and the Broads,
Over Edgbaston, and Wimbledon and Lords,
They'll be sunshine on speech days,
And sports days and beach days,
And Regent Park thesps treading boards;
And the pigs – they'll be swooping,
And looping the looping,
For rapturous sun-bathing hordes

And the rustics will be dancing in the clover,
Every ploughman, shepherd, dairymaid and drover,
For the rain will fall precisely,
When and where required, to nicely
Fill the reservoirs and duckponds, and moreover:
Satan and his crew infernal
Shall be shivering in thermals,
As hell will be entirely frozen over
Nick Syrett

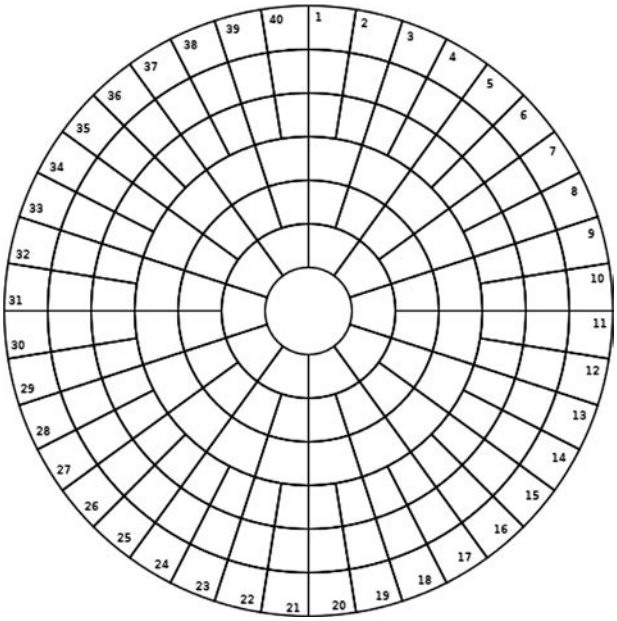
Surprisingly, the forecast, just last Monday,
Was all about my many long-lost chums
At school back in the Forties: Malin, Lundy,
Cromarty, Fisher, Forth (from Rugby scrums),
FitzRoy, who claimed his name meant royal blood
(We pointed out it meant he was a bastard),
Fat 'Snowball' Wight, who caused the loos to flood,
Young Bailey, who would secretly get plastered.
I chuckled when they mentioned poor old Dogger,
Caught in flagrante with the school nurse, Shannon;
The head, 'Ben' Dover, flogged the filthy snogger,
Expelled him like a bullet from a cannon.
And Tyne, whose father ended on the scaffold;
We called him 'Tyne the Knot' – such callous kids!
But when they came to Faroes, I was baffled;
Surely they're buried in the pyramids?
Brian Allgar

Just in; a storm front forecast,
Large hailstones, gales expected,
A funnel cloud looms westward,
Crop damage (huge) detected,
A supercell, a monster,
Prepare for loss of power,
Seek shelter from the deluge,
A savage, soaking shower,
Evacuate your homes now,
We're facing mass destruction,
A twister twice the scale of
That Pompeiian eruption,
Update; it's been downgraded,
The sun's out, warmth divine,
Light breezes, perfect beach day,
Use sunscreen, folks. It's fine.
Janine Beacham

NO. 3460: AS YOU LIKEN IT

You are invited to take as your first line 'Shall I compare thee to a [fill in the space with trisyllable of your choice, which can be a single trisyllabic word or a three-syllable phrase] and continue for up to a further 15 lines. Please email entries to competition@spectator.co.uk by midday on 22 July.

Crossword
2760: Metalwork
by Madrigal



Twenty radial lights run from rim to centre, twenty from centre to rim. The circuit next to the outer one contains, clockwise from radial 1, a quotation attributed to the name appearing in the inner ring. The italicised clues contain the definition and a mixture of the solution (beginning at the beginning, or ending at the end of a word) including an extra letter. In clue order, these eight letters provide the source of the quotation. 11 is in *Collins*.

Clues (all six letters)

1 Sick in front of boat – swell!
2 Information of little value is evidence of leak?
3 Weight stirs faulty watches found thereabouts?
4 Feel acute shame, languish, with rector taking four steps back
5 Farthest from The Wash tidal drift
6 Two females are leaving plaice perhaps that's somewhat overdue?
7 Chewy leftover antelope
8 Reader of scripture's one making cross after start of evensong
9 Awards no marks?
10 Paul's conned suckers
11 Single woman's tribe
12 Brief timespan for Nicholls' narrative
13 Extreme *Tinder* content – it makes you sick!
14 Flier's endlessly stinging?
15 Specifying North American dynasty?
16 Scott Lang's mass for first new magistrate
17 In the course of ephedrine drug
18 Making a request while ruler
19 All about night raving
20 Will's complaining one abandons purpose
21 Very hot driver fans herself
22 Feminine lady, losing head, showing rare wildness
23 Uniform cut short is momentarily dazzling
24 Edmund's exacerbated lie to himself
25 Surround English Nationalist network whose content is revolting
26 Biogenetic slip
27 Free in wild?
28 Scarcity of popular celebrity sandwiches
29 Losing page in parts of printing presses causes delays
30 Ancestral mount in the Golan Heights
31 Support for opening Bristol line
32 Accommodation at sea, housing a large number, almost totally dire
33 New laptop reduced, needs reconfiguration relating to connections?
34 Burnt almond is coarse
35 Vocal friend catches term of endearment
36 Take in the groove, bodily
37 Most favourable points are with German chamber on reflection
38 Work rate of Cambridge's honoured mathematician
39 Almost circulating SMS containing number – on the contrary! (4,2)
40 Fragrant oils piscivores broadcast

A first prize of a £30 John Lewis voucher and two runners-up prizes of £20 vouchers for the first correct solutions opened on 27 July. Please photograph entries and email them (including the crossword number in the subject field) to **crosswords@spectator.co.uk**, or post to: Crossword 2760, The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP.

Name .....

Address .....

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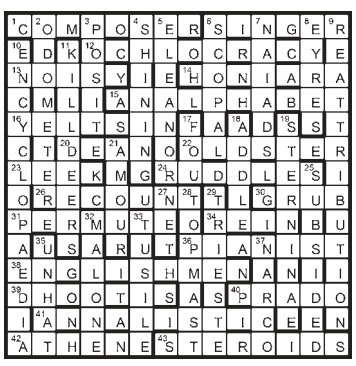
Email .....



SOLUTION TO 2757: OBIT VIII

NEIL SEDAKA (anagram of LEEK/NAIADS 23A/7D), who was a fine COMPOSER (1A), SINGER (4A) and PIANIST (36A), died on 27th February 2026. Two of his best-known works, 'Breaking Up Is Hard To Do' and 'Stupid Cupid', are cryptically suggested by DHOOTIS (39A), an anagram of IS H (sym) TO DO, and AMOUR FOU (21D/17D).

First prize D.V. Jones, Llanfair Caereinion, Powys
Runners-up Thulasi Vernalls, Milton Common, Oxon; John Pugh, Cardiff

THE VINTAGE CHEF | OLIVIA POTTS

Crème caramel

If you've stuck out my cookery writing for long enough, you'll know that I am a bit of a labrador when it comes to different dishes: greedy, ready to try anything, and likely to enjoy it. Food is where my general cynicism and air of ennui gives way to unbridled enthusiasm. There are very few dishes that, when done well, I won't chalk up in the 'good' column.

For a long time, crème caramel was the exception to that rule. To be fair, my experience of it had been limited: childhood self-catering holidays in northern France meant that my introduction to the crème caramel did not show it at its best. Dished out from the under-counter fridge came supermarket versions of what Raymond Blanc has called 'the French National Dessert': yoghurt pots

I didn't know what these French people were on, but they seemed to be undiscerning about their puddings

filled with bland, bouncy custard infused only with the flavour of the plastic casing. Out they would come with a loud slurp, followed by a dribbling, tawny-coloured liquid. I didn't know what these French people were on, but they seemed to be undiscerning about their puddings.

Judging the pudding on its shop-bought, plastic-encased version was perhaps unfair, but the punishment was just: I spent the next 15 years convinced I didn't like crème caramels. I'd look at them on menus and on other people's plates and wonder: didn't they know there was a crème brûlée or tarte tatin available? Who would choose a Gallic milk jelly sitting in its own sauce? I avoided it assiduously.

My second encounter with it, therefore, was not a voluntary one. At pastry school, the dreaded slimy jelly turned up on my syllabus. They took custard seriously there: two weeks out of our eight-week first term were devoted to the stuff. But crème caramel was the recipe I was least excited about.

Like all the stuff we produced in class, we were allowed to take the finished crème caramels home with us at the end of class, so I shimmied my puddings into my trusty Tupperware, and held it tenderly as we swayed up the length of the Victoria line, back home. I'd intended to keep it for my husband, less from magnanimity and more because – let's remember – I had no interest in eating a crème caramel. I'm still not quite sure how I came to be standing in front of my fridge, door open, spoon dug deep into the pudding. But the fugue state continued until I had eaten the whole thing. And suddenly I understood: the gentle jiggle of the soft vanilla-freckled custard sat against the near-bitter, smoky caramel – dark mahogany and unrecognisable from what I had eaten more than a decade before. Now I understood what the fuss was about. And I was going to have to start making my own.

Now, I will confess to a small cheat in my recipe: a couple of extra egg yolks. Usually a crème caramel uses only whole eggs, as opposed to a crème brûlée, which uses only yolks. That's why you can turn a crème caramel out and it will keep its shape, whereas you have to eat a brûlée from the pot. The whites give needed jiggle and natural jelly to the crème caramel – but those extra yolks bring a custardy richness that might not be strictly 'correct' but are delightful nonetheless. That's a good enough reason for me.

Crème caramels must be cooked slowly, in a low oven, using a water bath to diffuse heat: this ensures the softest, smoothest of custards, with just enough structure to be turned out.

Ah, the turning out! Always a moment of anxiety, even for the confident cook. The trick to it comes in two parts: first, an overnight rest in the fridge, which hydrates the caramel into the sauce coating the outside of the custard, so you're not left with a brittle puck of toffee. Secondly, go slowly: run a knife around the edge of the ramekin, and gently wiggle it until you feel the caramel release. Then you can confidently invert the mould and reveal your beautiful pudding.

Join Olivia Potts for Truffles and Trattoria in Rome 2-6 December 2026. For more details about this Spectator *Club trip, go to spectator.com/tastings*

Serves: 4
Hands-on time: 15 minutes plus overnight chilling
Cooking time: 45 minutes

For the custard
– half a vanilla pod
– 200ml whole milk
– 200ml double cream – 2 eggs
– 2 egg yolks – 65g caster sugar

For the caramel
– 100g sugar
– 1 tbsp warm water

1. Heat the oven to 140°C/120°C fan. Splice the vanilla pod and scrape out the seeds. Place the milk, cream, vanilla seeds and vanilla pod in a pan and bring to steaming, then set to one side to infuse.
2. Place the sugar over a medium heat: do not stir, but swirl once it has melted to keep the mixture even. Cook until the syrup turns a deep mahogany. Carefully pour the water into the caramel – it will spit! Once smooth, carefully pour the caramel into four 150ml ramekins. Leave to set hard for a few moments.
3. Put the ramekins into a roasting tray, and boil a full kettle. Whisk the eggs and yolks with the sugar in a bowl. Sieve the warm milk directly onto the egg and sugar, and whisk until combined. Divide the custard between the ramekins.
4. Pour the boiled water into the tin until it comes halfway up the ramekins. Bake for 45 minutes until the custard is just set. Remove the ramekins from the tray and, once cool, transfer to the fridge overnight.
5. To serve, run a dinner knife round the inside of each ramekin. Using your fingertips, twist the surface of the pudding until you can feel the caramel release from the base. Place a plate over the dish, invert, and wait for the telltale weight that means your pudding has turned out. Eat straight away.

SARAH TIMS

Drink

Red alert

Declan Lyons

Last week the great and some not-so-good crammed into the gardens in Old Queen Street to gossip and carouse, sipping on seemingly endless reserves of Pol Roger and Whispering Angel.

As I surveyed this magnificent scene, it occurred to me just one thing was missing from *The Spectator*'s summer party: a glass of chilled red wine. For that is the drink of the moment – at least according to Ocado, which has reported a 1,020 per cent year-on-year increase in searches for 'chilled red wine'. What's even more encouraging for those of us who have concern to spare for the puritanism of the young is that this interest comes predominantly from young drinkers. Ocado's research suggests that 56 per cent of Gen Z and younger millennials have enjoyed chilled red recently. The sales for 'Chill Bill Spritzy Red', £10.50 a bottle, has surged by 827 per cent. It is fine. But *Spectator* readers deserve better.

Ocado has reported a 1,020 per cent year-on-year increase in searches for 'chilled red wine'

First stop, Mount Etna – where Sfuso di Anna is produced from a blend of red and white grapes. With 85 per cent Nerello Mascalese, some Grenache and indigenous whites, this is the perfect red to serve chilled as an aperitif rather than with a meal. I enjoyed it while loafing around in Sicily in April, but to my surprise I liked it even more on home soil while watching England struggle past Panama. The driving taste is cherry but the volcanic minerality is unmistakable.

For a more traditional option, and one perhaps best enjoyed with food, go to Beaujolais. For just a little more cost, the Manoir du Carra's Moulin à Vent is vibrant, fruity and fully Gamay. The Sambardier family have run the vineyards for many generations, the grapes are tended by hand and the result is a dark ruby with more strawberry on the nose – perfect for a summer evening.

More welcome still than the increased popularity of chilled red is the return of sparkling reds. Lambrusco is back. The best I've tried recently – and it was genuinely very good – is the Cantina Cleto Chiarli's Vecchia Modena Lambrusco Sorbara. Kept at low temperatures and aged for three months, this is a very dry and pale red with a mineral finish that almost resembles a blush rosé in the glass. It's £17.50 a bottle – a steal. If you want to feel as if you're back in the 1970s when Lambrusco first found its popularity, then enjoy it alongside a cheese and pineapple hedgehog (although we may all quickly tire of 1970s nostalgia once Andy Burnham has had his way with the economy).

For something in a similar style, but much more interesting, travel further south in Italy to the all too often overlooked Marche region. Vernaccia di Serrapetrona is a very special drink, made so that it can be savoured with a feast in what used to be the smallest DOCG area in the country. Its triple fermentation makes it unique. The passito is fermented separately and then added to the base wine, provoking a natural third fermentation. It's a dark, intense red with a fizz, unlike anything else I've had before. My favourite is Alberto Quacquarini's Vernaccia di Serrapetrona Spumante Secco.

In August it will be ten years since an earthquake shook central Italy, leaving hundreds dead and thousands homeless, and the scars are still evident across the landscape and in the towns and villages throughout the Marche. There's no better way to help the local people rebuild than by buying such an exceptional drink from these dedicated producers. And I can guarantee you that it's cheaper and tastier than Chill Bill Spritzy Red.

DEAR MARY YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED

Q. I am 26 and my problem is that I have four girlfriends. None of them knows about the other three. The background is that my previous girlfriend told me constantly how awful I am. Now that I have found four other girls, all of whom seem to think I am terrific, I am loath to give up any of them while my self-esteem is recovering. I have had about three or four dates with each one and I know I'm getting into deeper water each week. What would you recommend?
– Name and address withheld

A. It's all very well for you to be rebuilding your self-esteem but there's an unsavoury Hugh Hefner, dehumanising vibe about juggling four love interests. There may be some 'natural wastage' in time but you should draw a line under this experiment asap, before too much fondness has been incubated. The best judge of which girl would be best for you would be your mother. Arrange a series of casual introductions. She will know instinctively which candidate is most compatible long-term.

Q. Our children love our fabulous nanny, who's been with us for six years. During that time she's slowly and steadily become fatter and fatter. She obviously knows that the jabs exist, and she would definitely qualify for NHS help, but it is probably illegal for us to suggest it. Our (realistic) worry is that she's now so heavy she's quite likely to cause some structural damage when taking the children to their friends' houses. One in particular has some very fancy and delicate chairs, which she would reduce to splinters were she to sit down. Help, Mary!
– Name and address withheld

A. It is worth reading your household insurance policy in detail. Some policies cover members of the household for accidental damage they cause when visiting other people's houses. If yours does not include this coverage, the supplementary financial charge to put it in place is usually nugatory. You can then relax knowing that your own insurance will cover breakages.

Q. May I pass a tip to your readers? I don't need spectacles, but, like many people, I have one ear slightly lower than the other and this has always caused my sunglasses to look crooked. I've discovered that there are silicone 'sleeve retainers' which clip onto one of the arms to balance things out. They can be bought from the dreaded Amazon at £3.99 for four pairs under the brand name Cretty-Meet.
– H.S., Hillsborough, Co. Down

A. How considerate of you to share this tip at a time when most of us are wearing sunglasses. Incidentally, these sleeve retainers are also useful for stabilising ordinary glasses which have become too loose.

Write to Dear Mary at dearmary@spectator.co.uk

No sacred cows

Why the left avoid heated debate

Toby Young

The problem with being a well-known climate sceptic is that whenever there's a heatwave, you get buttonholed by eco-zealots who think it 'proves' they're right and you're wrong. The first person to confront me during the current sunny spell was a *Guardian* journalist at a right-wing conference, which the newspaper had clearly identified as a hotbed of 'denialism'. It didn't help that the air conditioning wasn't working and it was approaching 40°C in the main auditorium.

'I see you're sweating profusely,' he began, shoving a microphone in my face. 'Still think climate change is a hoax?' I had to patiently explain that few people on my side of this debate deny that climate change is real. We don't even maintain that man-made carbon emissions aren't a contributory factor – not many of us, anyway. The disagreement is about how much of the 1.5°C rise in average global temperatures since the 1850-1900 period is due to these emissions and how much to other factors, such as solar variability, natural ocean cycles and land-use changes.

Yes, we're fond of pointing out that the 1850-1900 period may have been unusually cold, coming as it did at the end of the Little Ice Age – so may not be a reliable baseline; and that the rise in temperatures since may have been exaggerated by recordings being made in built-up urban areas or near airports. But that isn't to deny that the climate has changed in the past 125-175 years.

One of the hallmarks of the climate Jeremiahs is a complete lack of interest in what their opponents have to say

This all matters, I told the journalist, because if the 'climate emergency' lobby is wrong about the extent of global warming and its causes, it may not be necessary to immiserate ourselves to achieve net zero by 2050. Even if we allow that there would be some benefits (in the unlikely event of China, America, India and Russia committing to the same target), they would likely be outweighed by the costs, which, as we know from estimates of how many billions we need to spend to decarbonise the UK's power grid, are eye-watering.

None of this made it into the *Guardian* article, of course. One of the hallmarks of the climate Jeremiahs is a complete lack of interest in what their opponents have to say. It's no good quoting J.S. Mill at them – 'He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that' – or pointing out that a policy of 'no debate' will eventually lead to defeat in the court of public opinion, as it has for trans activists. They are as deaf to arguments about why they should listen to the other side as they are to detailed rebuttals of their points. And in this, I'm afraid, they are typical of the progressive left.

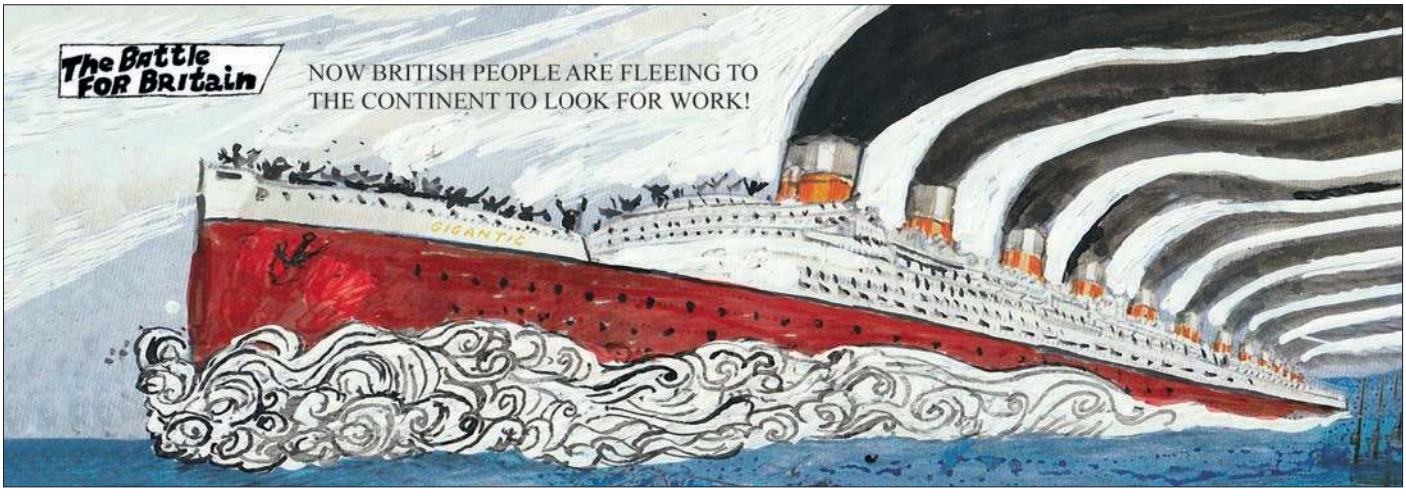
Why such a profound absence of curiosity? It's not as if that has always been true of their tribe – my father, a lifelong socialist, enjoyed disagreeing with conservatives far more than he did agreeing with fellow travellers. Arguing with his opponents was meat and drink to him. The drift towards intellectual isolationism is a relatively recent phenomenon. So why the withdrawal from public debate?

I have a number of theories. For one, the progressive left are on top and success leads to complacency. Insurgents have to study the enemy in order to win; defenders of the status quo think they don't need to, because they can't imagine losing. For another, they rarely stray outside their metropolitan bubble, which means they're used to being surrounded by people who agree with them. That, in turn, has led to the atrophying of the muscles you need to defend a political position, so it's easier to sidestep an argument than enter a debate with a match-fit antagonist.

The main reason, I think, is that the holders of the 'correct' positions on issues like climate change, immigration, abortion, euthanasia and trans rights are convinced of their moral superiority. They believe their 'values' have led inexorably to their political views and any challenge to those views is ipso facto a challenge to those 'values'. Since their core beliefs are unassailable, there's no point engaging in any discussion about the positions they've led to. Anyone who doesn't share them is either morally blind or in the pay of an evil corporation – i.e. in league with the devil.

In this respect, the modern left are not very different from pre-modern Christians, except that they're less willing to debate their quasi-religious beliefs because they have no tradition of biblical scholarship to draw on. In the absence of God or revelation, how can they defend their 'values'? This, ultimately, is why they're so unwilling to enter into any kind of dialogue – because deep down they know their convictions are resting on air. It is they who are in denial – in denial about the hollowness of their faith – not us.

MICHAEL HEATH



Sport

Our German shepherd

Roger Alton

Here's an interesting question: had Thomas Tuchel been Portugal's manager rather than England's, would he have picked Cristiano Ronaldo to go to the World Cup finals? I am pretty sure not. The reason England are better under Tuchel than they were under Gareth Southgate is that the German chose a squad equipped to go the full five weeks.

In the epic win over Mexico last weekend, what England needed in those nerve-shredding closing minutes was not for a Cole Palmer or a Phil Foden to tiptoe into the fray but for a battle-scarred old soldier like Dan Burn to take his place and start banging out the 40-yard headed clearances that kept his goalkeeper safe. (Tuchel had another old soldier in reserve, but unfortunately dear old Jordan Henderson has now wrecked his wrist on, irony of ironies, an advertising hoarding. Still, with a bit of luck, he will be back to cheer up the dressing room at the weekend.)

Had he been in charge of Portugal, Tuchel wouldn't have allowed Ronaldo to 'waddle around like an old grandad', in Chris Sutton's harsh but not inaccurate words, during the defeat to Spain. It is Tuchel's selections that have been so brilliant. To take just one: Barcelona must be thinking they have the bargain of the century in the £70-odd million they paid for Anthony Gordon, who has made a series of immense contributions to England's fortunes in this World Cup. He laid on both Harry Kane's goals against DR Congo and won the crucial penalty against Mexico. Above all he runs like a proper winger, happy to beat defenders on the outside and not so determined to cut inside all the time.

Tuchel looks like a history professor ready to roast his unruly students

Tuchel looks the part too, like a cadaverous history professor ready to roast his unruly students but desperate to drive them forward to greater glory. Unlike, say, Carlo Ancelotti, heavily garlanded of course but sweating uneasily in his three-piece suit and looking as if he was wondering where he could get a decent plate of pasta. Ancelotti's latest berth was with Brazil, and it must have been a relief when they were put out of their misery by an exemplary Norway.

On no account should England fans underestimate Norway. This is one of the most in-form teams in world football and the country has revolutionised the game at home by working on the sensible theory that it's pointless being any good at sport if you can't play it anywhere. Norway is not built for year-round open air football. Winters are long and daylight scarce. Grass is often either frozen or muddy. So they have installed or renovated huge numbers of artificial pitches. With more pitches, there's more time for training, school leagues and so on. It's the perfect breeding ground for a new surge in skilled footballers. All knockout games are tricky at this stage but good luck trying to call England's game against Norway.

This is no time to be thinking about rugby, sadly, but anyone who missed last weekend's Nations Championship should catch up on the opening match between the All Blacks and France at Christchurch. This was the very best of rugby, a jaw-dropping thriller from which the Kiwis emerged just 34-32 victors. It was Dave Rennie's first Test as New Zealand coach, and he made a point of promising 'optimistic' rugby. If this is to be the look of the 2027 World Cup, there's a lot to be optimistic about.

While we're at it, English rugby's policy of not picking players based abroad is rubbish. South Africa and nearly every other country in the world (bar NZ) just pick their best players. Imagine if the FA had a similar policy: England wouldn't have made it out of the group stage. But England are good and could be even better given our personnel. Italy's players ply their trade all over the place, as do Australia's and Scotland's and Wales's. Why not England?

The Open looms large at Birkdale. I just hope it'll be won by someone other than an American. I rather fancy Norway's Viktor Hovland or Kris Reitan: could we be in for a Norwegian summer in more ways than one? For England's sake let's hope not.

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Menander on new leaders

A Mr Burnham, A.M. (Andrew Murray) fancies being PM and Labour MPs have decided to humour him. Needing to assert what a democratic triumph this is, they will welcome ideas from Menander, the ancient Greek orator.

Menander would suggest starting their acclaim as follows: 'With favourable omens have you come to us, as splendid as a bright day of sunshine, appearing to us from on high. A welcome report announced your auspicious arrival and the good fortune that your subjects had fervently prayed for.'

MPs should then explain why he is needed, not slandering the previous leader but suggesting the subjects were unhappy, and go on: 'Just as if night and darkness had held the world in its grip, you appeared like the sun to our eyes and scattered all our hardships at once. Now that our afflictions have passed by like a cloud, all the people have breathed a sigh of relief and we come to greet you, beaming with joy.' Next, mention his deeds and describe in detail his hometown (Culcheth), depicting its landscape and drawing on its best-known features.

Applaud the deeds of his family and continue: 'We are confident that someone born from such parents, who strives to match his forebears, will be good and just to us, because they were just. No one will be imprisoned unjustly or punished unjustly by law; the rich man will not be favoured; the just plea of the poor man will not fall to the ground; let the rich stop boasting of their riches and the poor cease lamenting their powerlessness. Being moderate, he will be superior to the allure of gain or pleasures.'

And for an epilogue, try: 'We have come to meet you, all with our families, welcoming you with joy, greeting you with praises, calling you their saviour and protector and brightest star, while our children call you their provider and the saviour of their fathers.'

So much for a starter. They can Starmer him later.

— *Peter Jones*

Seen elsewhere

Nigel, my gigolo in tweed

Helen D'Vorcee

As seen in the Times

'You young people, I don't even know where to start!' My phone call to my daughter Isabel is entering its 40th minute. 'You're all too busy donning keffiyehs these days to do any BONKING.

'When I was your age, it was snogging to Duran Duran all night, then onto the couch for an hour's kip, then into the office for a full day's work at the PR agency or *Tatler* or wherever I was then… the point is there was no whingeing, just working hard and having a bloody good time.'

I then ask about Tom, Izzy's long-term boyfriend, but interrupt with another harangue: 'The thing is, Tom is very sweet. But at your age, you should be seeing all kinds of men and then, if Tom is the right chap, when you're both around 30, he'll be there waiting for you. It was just like that with your father and me.'

Yes – dear, obliging old Simon. These days his partnership at a leading City law firm doesn't require him to come down to London much, so he is mostly content to 'hold the fort' at our pile in Gloucestershire while I, on the advice of the *Times* lifestyle section, settle into my raunchy autumn years. Hunky toyboys, palm-readers and flamenco guitarists have come and gone, paid for with the proceeds from my freelance columns, along with a podcast I cohost. I cover everything from transgendereds in women's sport to which private school you should send your children to.

Ooh, yes! It's the mystery gigolo who's been making his way around the Cheltenham Ladies' class of '83

'Anyway,' I say, 'the point is: cram as much bloody sex in as you can while you're young – not everyone gets a second wind like me. And do be careful when you're actually "in the act", poppet, I hear girls your age can only do it when some chap's strangling you.' Izzy shrieks something about me being disgusting and then hangs up.

I start composing an angry text accusing her of being a Gen Z algorithm-obsessed Polanski-loving teetotaller when there's a knock at the door. Ooh, yes! It is the mystery gigolo who's been making his way around the Cheltenham Ladies' class of '83. Hung like a horse and built like a bull, per the giggling reviews. Despite having never seen his face I am already ready to mount it as I open the door.

'GooooooDDD AFTERNOON!'. I feel something shrivel up inside me, for standing right there is none other than the leader of Reform UK, Nigel Farage, in mustard corduroys, tweed blazer and Dulwich school tie. He breezes past me as I blub out half a question. 'B-b-b-but Nigel, b-b-'.

'You know something?' Nigel interjects. 'I've always said there's nothing wrong with getting on your bike. And making a few quid on the side!' Then suddenly his voice darkens. His eyes flash with cold, pure rage. 'Do you want me dead?'

'What? No…'

'Do you want me dead? It's a very simple question.'

'No.'

'D'ya think security comes on the cheap!? Good. Well, I'm glad we could clear that up.' Farage smiles as he wanders into my living room and begins rubbing his fingertips on the silver candelabra on the mantelpiece.

'Georgian. Very nice. Very. Nice. Indeed,' he mutters as he picks it up and stows it in his inner breast pocket.

'Nigel!' I cry.

'Do. You. Want. Me. To. Be. Shot. Like. Charlie. Kirk?' Nigel spits.

'No, but…'

'Very good!'

He's on the move again, trotting upstairs to the children's bedrooms which have remained unchanged since they left for university. The door to Izzy's slams in my face as I try to follow him. 'NIGEL!' I shout, banging at it. I hear something break as I finally force open the door.

On the floor is Nigel, scrabbling for coins among the remains of Izzy's childhood piggy bank. His head swivels and he meets my eyes with a toothy grin.

'Ever thought about buying yourself some gold bullion? They aren't printing this stuff you know. You could double your money!'

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Manchesterism

'If I hear anyone say Manchesterism again, I will…' said my husband, leaving his thought unfinished, and slipping, rather easily, into the role of Lear in his impotence. I had no intention of explaining to him what Andy Burnham means by Manchesterism. No one knows – perhaps not even he. But the word has been around since 1883, when it was reputed to be a system that 'enriched the few at the expense of the many'.

That had been the charge against its inventors, Richard Cobden and John Bright, whom Disraeli accused in 1846

of being 'Gentlemen of the Manchester School, who believe they may fight hostile tariffs with free imports'. To free trade, the Manchester School of Liberalism added the reduction of state intervention, rejoicing in the prosperity of mills worked by barefooted girls.

Francis Hirst, the principal contributor to an 1897 book called *Essays on Liberalism by Six Oxford Men*, defended Liberalism against charges of *Manchesterism* – or *Manchesterianism*. 'A sneer at Cobden, a contemptuous allusion to Manchesterianism and the "dismal science",' he wrote, 'help nowadays to make up that small but choice reservoir of blind abuse, upon which Social Democrats and Primrose Leaguers [campaigners in favour of Conservative principles] draw for the great work of irrigating electoral ignorance.'

In 1931, however, Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, condemned the 'teaching of the so-called Manchesterian Liberals'. The Pope's thinking was influenced by the Jesuit Heinrich Pesch, who criticised his fellow economist Ludwig von Mises for attributing 'the terrible conditions in English factory regions where Manchesterism prevailed, not to that phenomenon, but to other circumstances'.

For Burnham to appropriate *Manchesterism* requires the old word to be turned upside down and emptied of meaning – or simply ignored.

— Dot Wordsworth

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